Generosity and Gratitude

Dominic Kirkham takes another look at the ethics of Jesus.

The coronavirus quarantine has caused unprecedented changes to habits and lifestyles. It has also provided time for a deeper reflection on our values and lifestyles that have brought us to this point. Amongst its more positive consequences I have noticed a willingness amongst friends to share books that arrive unexpectedly by post. For me one such surprise was a copy of *The Morals of Jesus* by Nicholas Harvey. The gift was from a friend who was an Anglican minister.

It is an interesting and challenging book in that Harvey, a former Benedictine monk and lecturer in ethics, thinks morality has loomed large in Christian history only primarily because of the Church's fear of individual and social disintegration. But he contends that this totally misrepresents what Jesus was about, since 'there is little evidence to suggest that Jesus was all that interested in morality' (p.6). Indeed, a number of his sayings and parables are difficult to classify and taken together they certainly don't seem to add up to a coherent 'moral system': 'Leave the dead to bury the dead', 'He who does not hate…'; 'I do not come to bring peace but a sword'; 'Why call me good?' etc. Some parables such as the labourers in the vineyard even seem an affront to natural justice.

Instead, Harvey argues that as the gospel unfolds, it 'presses beyond all systems and puts all securities in question', and thus is quite at odds with 'the current of biblical fundamentalism now running in most churches and the new papalist fundamentalism in the Roman Catholic church, both [of which] find their security in the notion that the moral life is already decisively chartered for us.' (He was writing during the pontificate of John-Paul II.) But rather than premeditated moral enlightenment, many of the sayings of Jesus seem more like off-the-cuff *repartee* that arises from close encounters and forces the listener into self-reflection and self-questioning: one thinks of his doodling in the sand (Jn. 8.7) or asking about Caesar's coin (Mk 12.17).

A different kind of Kingdom

When it comes to the ministry of Jesus I must confess that I have generally been happy to go along with the view – dismissed as inadequate by Harvey – that 'Jesus offers distinctive moral teaching clearly superior to what is available elsewhere' (p.32). The gathering of his teachings in the so-called Sermon on the Mount does stand out as a very high moral standard indeed, epitomised by what is often referred to as the Golden Rule of morality: to love thy neighbour as thyself (Mt 22.39). Of course I realise this is not unique – Hillel said something very similar, as did Confucius and Buddha, and recently Karen Armstrong has been campaigning for the world religions to sign up to a 'Charter of Compassion', towards which, in their better moments they are or should be tending.

In the gospels this new dispensation and attitude to life is referred to in the term, 'the kingdom of God'. This term is used extensively and has both profoundly ethical and earthly implications. It is not some grand cosmic vision of extra-terrestrial salvation but, rather, a yearning for deep and unflinching ethical committedness on *Earth* – sharing a coat or a meal, being the least, laying down your life for your friends. It's about personal, social, cultural, and political transformation.

But as the scripture scholar John Dominic Crossan, writes, Jesus does not just announce to his audience that God's kingdom is now present: 'He is announcing that it is only present *if and when* it is accepted, entered into, and taken upon oneself. If discussion and debate, agreement and disagreement, argument and contradiction do not arise from and because of his challenges, then no change in consciousness can take place, no paradigm shift can occur, and no kingdom of God can be present.'

An existential attitude

Having said all that, however, I have always had a sense that this is not the whole story of the teaching of Jesus, and that, as Harvey so clearly

exposes, there is something much deeper and more radical behind this. For the gospels seem to express a sense of divine immediacy and the implicit benignancy of life – of not a sparrow falling unseen, of the flowers in the field that neither labour nor spin, of the sun shining on the bad as well as the good, of the rain falling on the honest and dishonest alike (Matt 5:45). Contained within these seemingly rather bland observations, as the scripture scholar Robert Miller has argued, lies perhaps the most profound insight into not only the mortal outlook of Jesus but just how radical his teaching was, for 'it calls into question what is perhaps the most fundamental of biblical values: that God rewards righteousness and punishes wrongdoing.' Those hearing the aphorisms would have found the teaching disturbing because it not only 'dares to doubt a bedrock belief [of Judaism], but because it does so in perhaps the most disconcerting way imaginable: gently.' Such was the art and manner of the moral radicalism of Jesus.

Even without the specifically theistic element, this attitude of Jesus translates easily into a sense of the 'givenness' of nature/existence, of the glory of life and the need for an underlying gratitude, sensitivity and respect for this cornucopia. In the spiritual ferment that fed into the emergence of modernity in the seventeenth century, the pantheism of Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura* (God or/ as Nature) and nature mysticism such as that of Jacob Boehme's *The Divine Signature of All Things* (1621), we are led inexorably onwards to the poet Wordsworth's sense of the human spirit co-existing with nature from which it emerges, a 'natural-supernaturalism' that presages modern eco-awareness.

Underlying all of this is an *attitude*. Recently a new freshmen course at Yale to help undergraduates settle in and cope with the stresses of their new life has been gaining much wider notice and acclaim – for it focuses on cultivating a sense of gratitude as the key to human happiness. What strikes me about this is its essential similarity to what Viktor Frankl was saying in his reflections on the much more extreme circumstances of the Auschwitz death camp, an ordeal recounted in *Man's Search for Meaning*. The development of 'logotherapy', a psychoanalytical tool based on his experiences, was an attempt to address the moral vacuum in the lives of many people but particularly the young. Both he and numerous other survivors I have known found that the core issue in survival was one of attitude: a determination to remain positive and grateful for life, even in the face of suffering and death – and this is a point with which Harvey also wrestles. I believe this attitude of existential confrontation/living underlies all that Jesus said and did.

It has been suggested that 'lilies of the field' were the poppy anemone or windflower, here shown flowering in Israel today.

This attitude toward reality – also a feature of the present pandemic – focuses the mind on the possibilities of life *in the present moment* as the only moment of worth, and confronts us with its challenge of what we will make of it. It is through such moments that we come to self-realisation. Harvey is a bit dismissive of developmental theories such as those of Maslow, Rogers and Fromm – seeing them as 'only a selective form of psychological self-realisation' (p.29) – and opines that this is not what the gospel is about.

Nevertheless, there was a time, early on in my religious life, when I found these works not only enlightening but transformative in helping me to come to terms with who I was/am, and was persuaded that at the heart of this was the ability to love (Fromm's *The Art of Loving* – still stands on my shelf in front of me). And that brings me back to that Golden Rule and what we have made of it.

I will always remember a little incident that took place many years ago when as a newly ordained priest I was running an ecumenical gospel study day in the parish (Storrington). Most of those

present were formidable retired women of vast experience and acumen. When the dominical injunction of 'loving thy neighbour as thy self' (Mt 22.39) came up, one woman stood and caused not a little consternation and amusement by forcibly stating, 'But I don't love myself – in fact I hate myself – so how can I love my neighbour ?' The ensuing turmoil and discussion produced no resolution.

Thinking about this, as I have often since done, I have concluded that like the rest of us she was a product of the long Christian tradition of teaching on Original Sin: that we are fallen creatures; that there is no goodness in us; that our works are useless (a theme even stronger in the Protestant tradition); that the world is 'a dirty little place' (even stronger in Augustinian and Platonist tradition); and that we're all heading for damnation. The consequence of this foundational and pernicious teaching is a self-denying asceticism which demands self-annihilation.

Two types of morality

This is the Christian tradition of morality or 'moralism' that Harvey refers to as a long list of 'shoulds' and 'should nots' that is so focused on social control that our lives often remain unlived and suppressed – some might say 'sublimated' – as a result of fear and guilt. Such 'heteronomous' or command morality, that justifies itself simply by the authority of an arbitrary pronouncement – 'the Law' – is not only oppressive and unpersuasive but was indeed dismissed by Jesus, 'You have heard it said….'; 'The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath.' In contrast to ecclesiastical demands, the words of Jesus are spoken and emerge as exhortations and ideals out of human encounters in specific situations not as binding commandments or expressions of 'natural law' that can be read off as literal injunctions – like ripping out one's eye to avoid temptation (something I never heard of having actually happened). Moral values do not drive a person; as Frankl wrote, they 'do not *push* him, but rather *pull* him.'

This distinctive characteristic has been described (by Paul Tillich and John Robinson among others) as 'theonomous' – something that reaches beyond supranaturalism and naturalism to a third position in which the transcendent is nothing external or 'out there' but encountered in the *Thou* of finite relationships as their ultimate depth and ground. Such thinking was very much at the heart of Martin Buber's existential humanism, according to which 'all real living is meeting' and in that meeting we find the holy, the 'Eternal *Thou*'. From meeting grows understanding, acceptance, respect and communion. This would seem to give real insight into the life of Jesus, who lived in companionship and whose teaching arose from many such meetings and encounters.

It is partly because of this dynamic or emergent sense of the innate possibilities of life, itself an aspect of our long evolutionary emergence, that I have come to reject the foundational ecclesiastical doctrine of Original Sin that swamps everything else. This includes the Pauline rhetorical trope of the Second Adam – there never was a first! – and sees the life of Jesus primarily as an offering for sin atonement). With this comes a ready-wrapped, rule-dominated, prescriptive form of morality that is highly selective and completely misreads and distorts the aspirational – and unachievable! – attitude of Jesus. Yes, he may have condemned divorce but he also said equally forcibly, 'Love your enemies'; 'Give to all who ask' and 'Sell all you have and give the money to the poor.'

Subsequently, even the most iniquitous of practices such as usury, condemned alongside sodomy for a thousand years with unspeakable disgust (Dante places those guilty of these sins together in the seventh circle of hell), was quietly rehabilitated with the emergence of new attitudes toward the use of money and the arrival of modern banking practices. Similarly, the justification of war offered no problem for the church.

In place of rules and injunctions against perversities I see the morals of Jesus as the aspiration of possibilities; as pointing not to the inevitability of perdition, but rather of the chance of better outcomes. It is in the endless possibilities of openness, of what the radical theologian Don Cupitt called 'solarity' or 'solar living' (emulating the endlessly shining benignancy of the sun), reaching beyond ourselves to the unattainable goal of perfection – 'being perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' – that I see the true understanding of the 'morality' of Jesus – embracive, uncensorious, unequivocal, radical almost beyond rational comprehension.

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