

CONTEMPLATION IN A WORLD OF VIOLENCE II

THE STRANGENESS OF THIS PASSIVITY...

IT IS ONE OF THE oddest things when something you have read about and "know about", and vaguely assumed, without giving it too much attention, to be true, turns out in fact to be true. And especially, of course when it turns out that it is, as true, something quite unrecognizable in terms of what it looked like when you read about it or "knew about" it.

Something like this has been my experience in the last eighteen months or so with relation to what I learnt, and I imagine that many of you did too, about the supposed difference between ancient and mediaeval theology, on the one hand, and modern theology on the other. Ancient and mediaeval theology, we were taught, had a theocentric view of things, in which things came from God to humans, and God was the measure of all things. Modern theology, it is sometimes said, has an anthropocentric view in which humans are the measure of all things; and human subjectivity and the "turn to the first person" are the necessary starting point in any theological understanding, and thus, I suppose, in any contemplative life.

A good example of the ancient and mediaeval view would be Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologiae* is taken (and I don't dispute this) to have a view of the things of God, apparently a neo-platonic view, which is marked by the movement out from God and back to God, with us, as part of the universe of creatures, somewhere on the receiving end: going out from God and coming back to God.

Well, in a sense, all I want to do with you today is explore the strangeness of having discovered that this so-called "ancient" view is true. I don't particularly find the neo-platonic formula of things coming out from God and returning back to God to be helpful. It sounds too tidy, not open-ended enough. But I know what it means. It is the ultimate shift in perception. And it has been dawning on me gradually over the last eighteen months or so, in an other-than-merely-intellectual sense. To put it briefly, it is the sense that the real subject of the universe, the world, and of my life, is God. And thus the gradual appreciation that, without in any way being diminished as an acting subject myself, in other words, without any sense of being any the less real a subject for that, time and time again "I" find myself more properly the subject of passive verbs than of active ones.

I've managed to find three references in St Paul to this sense, and there may be others, but I shall give you these before attempting to look at what the shift means in four different fields of our contemplative life. The first Pauline reference, in chronological order, is Galatians 4:9. Paul is expressing astonishment at how some of his converts, who have received the Spirit of God's Son, could have turned back to their former ways:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods; but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more?

It is an apparent aside:

you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.

That is what I am trying to get across. Paul is clearly referring to something new which his converts came to know about God, and that "coming to know" is better described as a coming to be known.

The second and third references are both in the *First Letter to the Corinthians*:

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." "Knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him.

The contrast here appears to be between knowledge as something held possessively, and the sort of knowledge which comes with love, which is a certain sort of being known, and more like being possessed than possessing.

The third reference is:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know even as I am known. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

In other words, St Paul simply takes it for granted that "being known" is what underlies all our knowing, and that we do not yet know properly because our "being known" is still to some extent veiled from us in a world run by rivalry and death. And this "being known" is in fact the reception of a loving regard towards which we, like so many heliotropes, find ourselves empowered to stretch in faith and hope. No wonder love is the greatest of these three, because it is the coming towards us of what really and inalterably is, the regard which creates, while faith and hope are the given response from

within us to what is; the given response which love calls forth, while we are "on the way". Faith and hope are a relaxing into our being uncovered, discovered, as someone loved. But they are relaxing into love's discovery of us.

What did the treasure in the field think after the man had found it, and covered it over and while he had gone off to sell everything in order to buy the field? Treasure doesn't think, you may say. Precisely. Hence the importance of faith and hope: faith and hope are what it looks like for unthinking treasure, which has no idea of its worth, to find itself actually being able to share in the delight of the one who has found it while waiting for him to come back and take possession. Faith and hope are the contagion from the other's delight in knowing and discovering us, and of course the treasure depends entirely on that never-to-be-withdrawn delight and discovery emanating from the other rather than on anything within itself.

Well I'd like to see if I can explore what it seems inadequate to call the strangeness of this passivity by sharing some exploratory notes about three or four different fields: the psychological, the soteriological, that of prayer and that of living in a world of violence, to see if any of this makes sense.

I. PSYCHOLOGY

One of the ways I knew about this strange passivity "intellectually" before knowing it "as finding myself swimming in it" was through the understanding of desire which I tried to set out for you last year when we met at Downside. This is Girard's central insight, and to my mind the incalculably important philosophical insight which he has theorised for us. This is the simple, and never-sufficiently-to-be-meditated-

on perception, that humans desire according to the desire of another; or, to put it in slightly more literary terms: we receive ourselves through the eyes of another.

All I want to say is that this is not a metaphor, but, I take it, a simple and apt anthropological description of how any of us comes to be. Let me try and set the scene appropriately: someone important comes into the room, a room in which a group of people are gathered, among whom you are. This is someone important who you have been expecting, and for whose recognition you have been hoping. Now when that person comes in, your feeling, sense of worth and so on will depend entirely on her recognition of you. Will she notice me? If she does notice me, will it be with clear pleasure? Will she come over to me? Or will I be to her simply as another anonymous figure who happens to be present? This, I would say, is not something of which you are necessarily conscious, still less do you formulate it. In fact you will pick it up in your body. If her body language is clearly relaxed and pleased to see you, any smile she gives you will be picked up by your body as communicating that pleasure, and you will feel an uplift, your spirit will soar, and you will have the sense "Yes, I really am." If, on the other hand, whatever her smile says, her body language indicates that she is going through the motions, being polite, wants to be somewhere else, that you are not really important to her, then your body will pick it up, and in the dawning disappointment, part of your self will slink yelping away like a wounded puppy, tail between the legs. Now the way that our sense of self is given to us through the eyes of another is not simply a function of adult behaviour, as I hope is obvious. It is

what we are inducted into being from the moment we were conceived. The other is always massively prior to us, and we are always in fact being drawn in, from our vulnerable infancy onwards, as peripheral to something anterior to us, whether that other is physical existence, language, memory, or sense of self. We are drawn in through repeated infantile sound and gesture, and it is imitation gives us being. We always come to inhabit what is other than us, a health system, an education system, a country, a cultural and linguistic field of reference, as massively the recipient of something rather than its protagonist in any dramatic way.

If this is true, then in the case of any of us, our "I", rather than being the fixed point, from which our desire and our understanding flow, is the malleable symptom of that which is prior to, and other than, us. We are participatory "symptoms", as it were, who become what we are in the flow of what is prior to us and gives us being, and in both our receiving of that being and our denial of that reception do we come to be. Which is why any insistence on my originality, on the priority of my desires, or my ideas can in fact so easily cut me off from being a recipient, and turn me into one who reacts against, which is always the high route to smallness of spirit and weakness of creativity. I wonder whether our most creative musicians and writers haven't in fact been those who were most easily able to sit loose to their own extraordinary capacity to suck in the playing cards around them, shuffle them and deal them out again in a series of new juxtapositions which gave their contemporaries a sense of extraordinary novelty. Only someone like Rossini, who wasn't in competition with Mozart, could so happily and

recognisably borrow bits of Mozart as jokes in his own music and yet manifestly be producing something entirely his own. And it is only the glance from posterity which can see how much any of these "original geniuses" was original not in creating something *ex nihilo*, but in throwing up with delight that in which they were swimming, as though it swam within them.

The point of this is that St Paul is not making some arcane or mystical point in talking about the essential Christian discovery as being one of being known by God. On the contrary, He is showing some of the first fruits of the extraordinary anthropological discovery about who we really are which came into our ken in the wake of Jesus' resurrection. If the true other who is prior to all of us is absolutely not on the same level as all the rivalries, fears, acts of possession, and creations of identity over against each other, then the emergence of that other destabilises what we took to be our self by making available to us a capacity to relax into being called into being without having to forge a being over against the other. We can be happy to ride being a "symptom" of another's causality rather than fearing that unless we can somehow make it into being the cause, we will fall out of being.

In other words, the other who is prior to us is not in rivalry with us, and we don't need to possess who we are as though we would lose it if we didn't grab it. There is not a scarcity of being or of regard from the other, against which we need to protect ourselves. And so we find ourselves being discovered and known in just the same sense as a really first rate impresario spots a talented future actor or singer long before the actor or singer knows that they are really talented, have what it takes. And it is in the impresario believing in them

that they are able to be discovered. They were "known" before they knew it. And if we were to be such an actor or singer saying "I was discovered" we wouldn't merely mean that someone with the right connections had simply lighted upon our talent which was already there. We would mean that their act of knowing, of discovering was actually creative of something into being. Our talent would be in some kind a symptom of their discovery of us.

So, the important person coming into the room turns out to be not on her way somewhere else, not harassed at having to deal with all the people who are seeking her attention, desperate for her acknowledgement; not miserly with her regard. On the contrary, she enters the room with full deliberation and has come in to stay, and her regard does indeed give you and me the sense that we are being discovered, that we are being invited to participate in something much bigger than ourselves, in which we will find that there is a real "me" there to be known, one that we could scarcely imagine before. The body language of this important person speaks as completely as her words; its relaxedness, unhurriedness and serenity are quite simply what real deliberateness and power look like, and are picked up as such.

To shift key slightly, but only very slightly: what would it look like to imagine the Eucharist as the body language of God come into our midst? Wouldn't it be simply... accurate?

2. SOTERIOLOGY

This brings us from the psychological to the soteriological. More than anything else over the last year, in which I have found myself talking about redemption and forgiveness to different groups of people, I have found that the shift

which is required for sense to emerge is exactly the same as the one I have been describing. Any account of our salvation at the hands of Jesus which is a description of something which happened, or happens, but told as if by a spectator or an onlooker, is fatally flawed. And what is fatally flawed about is that it is not told as an undergoing of something which is happening to me and which is turning me into a different sort of teller.

In other words, it is not being told by someone who is fundamentally passive to, patient of, something enormous happening which includes them and which is actually altering not only the words they say, but their capacity to be uttering words at all. For when we talk of salvation, rather than describing something happening "out there" we are in fact allowing ourselves to be "contaminated" by what we perceive in and behind the regard of one coming towards us. Let me try to illustrate this. A straight friend of mine from South America wrote back to me after reading the chapter on the Gerasene Demoniac in my book *Faith Beyond Resentment* to tell me what a revelation it had been for him. It had brought back to him a series of incidents when he was at secondary school. He and his classmates had lighted upon the class "maricón", the class "fairy", and had teased and bullied this guy remorselessly. Eventually the pupil in question had managed, no doubt after much beseeching his parents, to go off somewhere else, to another part of Venezuela, and my friend described to me how completely bereft he and his classmates had been left by this guy's absence, how they had found themselves lost as a group without their class "maricón". So, not apparently needing to read Girard in order to understand what to do next, they managed to find another class fairy

in a different class, and settled on him instead, and so shored up their group. It had come as a revelation to my friend, some years later, that this is what he had been doing. And I imagine indeed that he was engaged in that persecution in all "innocence", not knowing what he was doing. But I do not suppose that all the pupils in the group were equally ignorant of what they were doing. I suspect that the members of the group who would find it most difficult to analyse what they had been doing in the same clear and clean way as my friend did would be precisely those who had experienced some sense of relief at the time with respect to the treatment of the class fairy "because it was not me". In other words, someone else was occupying the place of shame, and I am deeply relieved that it is they and not I who am there, half-aware how arbitrary it is that it should be they and not I. And that means that whereas some people in the group, who are less insecure in their own status as "one of the lads", don't really attribute much importance to the creation of the victim, just going along with it, there are others whose contribution to the building up of group membership over against the class "fairy" is, let us say, motivated by a curious personal enthusiasm, who have developed let us say, firmer reasons than most for considering the other guy to be "evil" or "not one of us".

Now, let us suppose that our class "fairy" suddenly comes back to the school from elsewhere in Venezuela, free, happy, with no sense of revenge, delighted to see his former classmates. Let us begin to imagine what it is like to be in their shoes. Especially for those who were to some extent half-aware of how important it was for them that this guy occupied the place he had in their own constellation of emotional and social life, the return of the class fairy might be

seriously destabilizing. If he came back breathing threats and vengeance, that wouldn't be so destabilizing, because he would still be occupying the place of shame which they had given him, but would be merely occupying it as one trying to turn the tables with an inversion of strength. But if he comes back entirely free of vengefulness, and with no desire to turn tables on anybody, this is much more destabilising because it completely removes the place of shame. The person who can occupy the place of shame without caring what the group thinks of him is of course a particular threat to those who have most at stake in maintaining the group identity, which is to say, those for whom the place of shame is felt to be something close to them, something that they especially fear to occupy themselves, and thus for whom the enthusiasm with which they keep alive the group structure is strongest and most personally felt.

We can imagine how some of these people might be not at all pleased to see their former class fairy back if he was free of revenge, and thus, from their point of view, in contempt of their sacred order. It is the pits of their stomachs above all which will feel him as a threat. That is step one in my reconstruction: something happened that was destabilizing, and is perceived to have something to do "with me" in exactly the degree to which I am bound in, with greater or lesser awareness, into both needing a place of shame, and needing to avoid being the person who occupies that place. The "Other" is just there, as destabilizing.

Step two is the perception, which dawns gradually, that the other is not there, occupying this space, by accident. It is as if it begins to dawn that the class fairy was perfectly deliberately

occupying that space in the first place. It's not just that he "got over" the awful treatment which he received, thus putting into doubt the ability of the awful treatment to create, sustain and define a world. Far worse than that. It begins to become apparent that he had chosen freely to occupy that space and for a very curious reason: he knew how much the class needed there to be a place of shame in order for them to feel good; yet he also knew what a terrible diminishment of any of their capacity to be free and happy the need for that sort of group belonging leads to; and he decided to occupy the "place of shame" himself, not so as to attract attention to himself, not even "as a substitute", letting someone else of the hook, but with a far richer project in mind than that. He wanted to create the possibility that people he liked should be able to live free and happy without a place of shame and without ever needing to create one again.

Here we are beginning to come to grasp that strange passivity once again. What salvation looks like is the perception of a hugely powerful loving project as having come towards us and caught us unawares, where we fitted him into our scheme, unaware that he was deliberately occupying that place in our scheme so as to let us off having to live in a way run by such schemes. In other words, we thought we were in control, but we weren't. And what is bizarre, and destabilizing, and perhaps the most difficult thing to grasp about the Good News is that we have not been "caught out" by someone who confronts us. What has been "caught out" is the unreal, fear bound "we" which we took to be the real we. But the one coming towards us is not coming towards us in the first instance as a confrontation. Much more bizarre and slower to develop than this is

our perception that in order to have decided to come among us at all, and to occupy our place of shame, he must actually have really known and liked us all along.

Just try to think what it means for a violent man to discover that the object of his violence liked him before, during and after the violence, and had placed himself before him not in order to confront him, but because he knew perfectly well that the violent man was subject to a compulsion, and he longed for the violent man to be free. The realisation that the one who seemed to be my object was in fact a presence of far, far greater strength than I, and that I was in fact, all along, the object of that person's entirely friendly, knowing regard, this, I think is what leads to the strange passivity which I have described. "I" am undone and I am discovered as known in the as-yet unimagined regard of another.

This is also why I think that there is no Christian discourse of any sort at all that is not one undergoing this loss of "I" and the being discovered with a new "I". And I think that this is exactly what we mean when we say "I believe in the forgiveness of sins"... What I think is meant by that phrase from our Creed is: "It is as 'being forgiven', as undergoing, finding myself strangely passive, towards someone who is unbinding my previous way of belonging that I am given to believe in one who knows and loves me".

And this power of another, lovingly taking away the place of shame and our dependence on it, can be resisted. Ever since the Gospel was first preached it has been possible to refuse the consequences of God occupying the place of shame, thus rendering it null, so that there is no longer a place of shame. It has been possible to insist on trying to maintain a place of shame, on recreating one, on refusing the

collapse of the sacred. And this has led to families being against each other, children against parents and vice versa. This is why the one who inaugurated it knew that he would bring not peace but a sword, but also why he knew that once done, it could not be undone, and that fighting against it is futile. Sad and irrelevant. Sad for those caught up in it, because it is the definition of that which cannot be forgiven, since it is what refusing the offering of forgiveness looks like. This necessarily puts into question all our mechanisms for controlling forgiveness, which means, for ring-fencing the place of shame, which is why it is religious professionals who are the most greatly at risk since it is so easy for us to re-create a place of shame making it seem that we have the power of forgiveness rather than finding ourselves caught up as multipliers of the divine annulment of the place of shame. But irrelevant, something rather like blowing against a hurricane. There is no place of shame, and all attempts to recreate it partake of futility, refuse to dwell in the strange passivity of being brought to fullness of Creation.

3. PRAYER

So much for soteriology. Now for prayer. Supposing what I have said about the strangeness of passivity is true, then the principal place where we undergo both the strangeness and the passivity is prayer. It is not true that we pray so as to move God. It is truer that in our praying God is moving us. It is truer that we are prayed-in than that we pray. This I take to be absolutely in line with Paul's teaching in Romans to the effect that:

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

It is also, surely, the point of Our Lord's insistence that:

And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

If it is true that our "self" is a symptom, then prayer is God's way of getting into the symptom from within and transforming it. This picture of the self does indeed presuppose that we don't really know what we want, a discovery which may be one of the most important things about learning to pray. And this means not that we can't make our mind up about this desire or that desire, but that our mind is made up of, constituted by, contradictory desires such that we can't desire in a healthy way at all. The reason why Our Lord insists on prayer is not so as to turn us all into mystics who levitate and float off walls, though that would be fun too, but because it is by agreeing to get in touch with, and not mind sitting with and in the contradictory, somewhat "smelly" desires which move us that we are able to allow our desire to be strengthened, directed, ordered so that we actually become someone. This is the promise of prayer: don't be content with too little, dare to be given to become someone. And the promise is realised as a resting in and trusting in one who "knows what you need before you ask him" which means, who is the active subject whose "symptom" you are.

This picture is, of course, perfectly clear to people from an animist culture, since the idea of them being possessed by, and then moved by, a spirit which comes down upon them and gives them to be someone else is perfectly obvious. The malleability of selfhood is taken for granted. The picture of course is quite right, but the possessing Spirit about

which I am talking is on quite a different level from Ogum or Oxalá, Pomba Gira or Sete Capas, to name some of the "spirits" which "come down" on people in the Afro-Brazilian cults. Those spirits offer a temporary (and sometimes violent) displacement of "self". But being possessed by the Holy Spirit is different because, since it is the Spirit of God who is not in rivalry with us, it can move us and recreate us without displacing us. But we would do well to remember that we, just like them, are those who by prayer are learning to sit loose to becoming possessed by a new Spirit, who are being broken in by a new horse.

We use the word "indwelt" to signify the peacefulness of this particular possession, because we are possessed by someone who is not in rivalry with us, but gradually gives us to be what we find we were always meant to be, such that we are not simply passive in a straightforward sense, as is someone who is in a trance. Part of that person has to go to sleep in order for the temporary aberration to take over. We are passive in that we find that our becoming entirely active, and indeed entirely free-acting agents, is something given to us as we learn to have our resisting undone. A wind displaces a sailing boat which moves before it, but the fire of the Spirit warms the air which makes a hot air balloon free and mobile from within. The experience of prayer is that of the gradual learning to rejoice into my induction by an entirely gentle, trustworthy power, into freedom from all my ways of being tied in to the place of shame, one by one, and discovering this as given to me as a "real me" in a series of new desires for new projects which share the huge affection and gentleness towards others that I have found myself receiving.

4. LIVING IN A WORLD OF VIOLENCE

I would like to end by being very tentative about something which has exercised me considerably since we met last year, and this is to do with what the sort of "indifference" the sort of "turning away" the sort of refusal to be "fascinated" by wars, rumours, of wars and revolutions which our Lord advocated looks like. This indifference, this turning away emerged as Our Lord laid bare the structure of a satanic world order, and the "pseudo events" which that structure regularly produces in the hopes of keeping us on board. And I take it that as we learn to see through his eyes, we are learning to see with the eyes of the Creator who is coming towards us.

We have all been living this last year under wars and rumours of wars. And I think I need to make a distinction between two sorts of passivity which I think we must work hard not to confuse. There is the sort of passivity which is induced by what I might call "lies and violence fatigue". It is a kind of attitude of "a plague on both your houses, I am going to cultivate my garden" which is produced by the sheer volume of the barrage of lies and the distortions of power which emanate from the US government, our own government and that of others. Maybe part of the effect of this is to bludgeon us into a sense of helplessness. It is how helplessness is normalized into us.

This is, I think, the wrong sort of passivity. It is the passivity of those being ground down. It is a distraction and a dulling, a diminution of life, of interest, of zest. The strangeness of the passivity which I am out to try and point

to is that in receiving it, I become able to take all that violence and disturbance for granted, as so much froth in the midst of which we find ourselves being allowed to glimpse something which is huge and peaceful and gentle and being brought into being. Something which is simply unable to be perceived by those who are frightened that unless they do something, they will not be. Unless they achieve something, or provoke something, there will be nothing.

But we find ourselves undergoing contagion at the hand of one who is bringing things into being, who is drawing close with a power, a serenity and a purpose in the light of which all the apparently "meaning-giving events" are distractions and in whose approaching light we are already being enabled to resist being driven by all that casting around for meaning, that dangerous need to be good. The New Testament is full of the language of perseverance, of patience, of being found standing. It is also full of the language of non-resistance. In fact we are told not to resist evil in human form, but indeed to resist the devil. The distinction is interesting. For in anthropological terms it is exactly the same thing to resist human evil and not to resist the devil. Just as it is exactly the same thing not to resist human evil, and to resist the devil. Resisting human evil off our own bat is how we create Satanic meaning by becoming part of an endless tit for tat. Refusing to resist evil is how we refuse to create Satanic meaning. And how we are given to find ourselves taking part in the creation of real meaning, which is to say, in Creation which is coming upon us from Another.