

The Holiness of Jesus

Christopher S Webb

Holiness has something of a bad press. Being “holy” does not seem very desirable to many people in our contemporary society. Those who speak up for virtue are often derided as moralistic, sanctimonious, or holier-than-thou. The media reacts sharply against “preachy” public figures who presume to tell us how to order our private lives. And those who appear to be living lives of moral rectitude are treated with suspicion: can they really be whiter than white? Or are they hiding darker truths about themselves—clean on the outside, but as filthy as the rest within? We have seen so many spectacular falls from grace amongst our celebrities, politicians, and church leaders that we have become wary of taking virtue at face value. There are, it would seem, more wolves in sheep’s clothing than there are genuine sheep.

And who, after all, wants the sheep’s life anyway? Frankly, to many of us sin just seems a lot more fun than sainthood. Fans of The Simpsons know that, however flawed Homer and his family might be, they are a sight more bearable than the obnoxiously religious and impossibly perfect Ned Flanders. Just as the devil sometimes seems to have all the best music, so he often appears to have all the best and most entertaining pursuits, leaving the pious to their hair-shirts and homilies. It often looks as though the good and the godly are gingerly picking their way through a minefield of “thou shalt nots” while sinners romp in wide open meadows. Holiness only holds us back.

Or so it appears. But these images of sanctity and sin fall apart when we take a closer look at them. In fact, when we take the time to reflect on the nature of virtue and vice, we make the unexpected discovery that it is holiness that leads us into the fullest, most enriching experience of life, while sin acts like a malignant cancer, slowly tearing us apart from within. We are made to be holy. And Jesus offers us the most profound insights into holiness—not only in his teaching, but also in the vibrant quality of his deeply virtuous life.

Created to love

The opening chapter of the Bible tells us that we are made “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27). Scholars and theologians have reflected for over two millennia about exactly what that might mean, but the apostle John, in his first letter, gives us an important insight into at least one significant implication. “God is love,” he writes, “and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 Jn 4:16). To bear the character of God is to have love hardwired into our essential nature. The more we are conformed to the character of God, the more perfectly loving we will become. We are created to love. When God calls us to holiness, he roots that call in his own character: “Be holy,” he says to the Israelites, “for I am holy” (Lev 11:44). Holiness, then, cannot simply be an abstract purity of our interior nature—an unsullied conscience, free from guilt. rather it is a summons to pure love, to be the kind of people who can develop good, deep, loving relationships, both with God and with other people, relationships which are safe and enriching for all concerned. Jesus certainly seems to understand the call in this way. In the first half of the Sermon on the Mount he addresses a series of issues which threaten to undermine the quality of loving relationships: anger, adultery, divorce, deception, and revenge. He then pushes the boundaries of love further than any reasonable morality would seem to demand: “Love your enemies,” he says, “and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). In this way, he says, you will “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). Love, it seems, is the fulfilment of holiness.

Many years later, the great twelfth century dominican writer Thomas Aquinas picked up on this strand of biblical teaching and made the startling assertion that love was more than the goal of Christian perfection: it is the fundamental power behind the created order. Just as physicists probe sub-atomic structure to identify the basic forces and particles that make up this physical universe, so Aquinas probed to the depths of Christian theology to identify the driving energy behind creation itself. In the end, Aquinas argued, everything is grounded in love, since all creation reflects the character of the one who made it. He suggested that we are not only made to love, we are made of love. everything we do is driven by this divine quality: all we can do is love.

But Aquinas had no illusions about the terrifying human capacity for sin. He wrote about the lethal power of sin, that “turning away from our last end which is God.” He came to see love as having the kind of awesome power we see in nuclear fusion. Well-ordered and directed to the right ends, love can transform lives, inseparably unite people with one another and God, and act as the harmonious and creative power which holds all creation in being. But misdirected—allowed to turn in on itself, allowed to run wildly on the heels of any and every desire of our misguided hearts—love can become a horrifyingly destructive force, tearing

apart the world from under our feet. Love, rightly ordered, will be the foundation of the kingdom of God. But grotesquely disordered love, inordinate self-love which swirls in on itself like a fierce tornado, has the capacity to shape tragedies like Auschwitz or the rwandan genocide. Sin—love disordered—is horrific. But holiness—love rightly ordered—is life in all its abundance. Love: The Holiness of Jesus We see this reflected in almost every page of the Gospel narratives. The Pharisees were created to love, but they turned that love in on themselves and exalted themselves as the guardians and purest practitioners of piety. They took the gift of life embodied into the law and transformed it into an instrument of condemnation and death.

Hence their disordered love could allow them to drag a woman into the presence of Jesus and demand that she be stoned to death (Jn 8:2-11) yet resist Jesus' gift of liberating healing in the synagogue because it is offered on the Sabbath (Mk 3:1-6). More significantly, the inwardly-twisted self-love of all those in Jerusalem, Jews and Gentiles together, drove the authorities and crowds to brutalize Jesus before nailing him to a cross where he might hang in agony and die. The horror of sin is plain in story after story, and nowhere more so than at Golgotha.

Yet the well-ordered love of Jesus—his holiness—runs through the Gospel narratives like a refreshing river. Confronted with a demoniac in their midst, the Gerasenes had reacted with fear and loathing, dreading the danger to themselves. Seeing only the problem they reacted strongly, pushing the man from their midst: "he had often been restrained with shackles and chains ... night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling" (Mk 5:4-5). But in his profound love, Jesus sees the man. Notice this: it is not the demons who are asked to name themselves; Jesus asks the man himself, "What is your name?" Treating the demons with contempt, he casts them out; treating the man with the kindest regard, he seeks to know him and draw near to him—perhaps the first person who has ever sought to do so.

Other examples of this profoundly well-ordered love abound. And fascinatingly those most damaged by sin, or most sickened by the sin within them, found this holiness not repellent but deeply attractive. There is no hint here of a judgmental "holiness" which defines itself over and above the flawed natures of others (the "holiness of the scribes and Pharisees" about which Jesus was so biting severe). In Jesus some of the most ruined souls found a refuge of love and grace. Mary Magdalene, in whom Christian tradition discerned a seriously disordered sexuality, found the one man with whom she could be safe. Levi and Zaccheus, both despised tax collectors, found one who refused to despise any. A man afflicted with leprosy found one person who was willing to reach out and touch him—perhaps as much a miraculous healing as the curing of his disease itself (Lk 5:12-16). A woman who was broken and weeping over her sinfulness found not only forgiveness, but one who defended her against her accusers (Lk 7:36-50).

This is the holiness to which we are called: a purity, certainly, but not a purity which stands aloof from a filthy and corrupted world, looking down with sanctimonious pity or judgmental horror on those still mired in vice. This is a purity of heart; a heart healed from the dreadful inward turn that maims its capacity to love well, a heart liberated from self-obsession, a heart enabled to do one thing only, and that thing well—to love. Jesus lived that purity, that holiness. And it is possible to learn from his life, teaching, and practices, how to open ourselves to the healing grace of God in such a way that this loving holiness is formed in our lives too. As we become like Jesus, we can become more truly holy ... and rejoice in it!

The hallmark of the holiness of Jesus is this constant turning toward others seen in his constant acts of humility and service. Perhaps the most striking example occurs on the night of the last supper. The apostle John tells us that Jesus, fully aware of his divine origins and significance, was seeking a way to love his disciples "to the end" (Jn 13:1—an equally accurate translation of the Greek could be "to the utmost"). So he stripped off his outer garment and proceeded to perform the work of the lowest, most menial slave: washing the filthy, dirt-cruste feet of those around him. The disciples are shocked and appalled, so much so that Peter is embarrassed for Jesus and tries to refuse. But Jesus persists, teaching them what holiness towards others might mean—and calling them to love one another to exactly the same degree. For we who follow Christ, opportunities for similar acts of humble service abound. The world around us scrambles to be the first, the greatest, the strongest; the way is wide open for those willing to become the least and the last. Jesus himself gives us numerous ideas of how we might live into the holiness of the servant. Choose to take the lowest place in the pecking order, not the highest (Lk 14:7-11). Share meals with outcasts, even inviting them into your home (Lk 14:12-14). do not be misled by trappings of honor and power, but be ready to recognize the presence of the King of Glory in even the smallest child (Lk 9:46-48). You might want to stop reading for a moment and reflect. What opportunities has God place before me to serve others? do I sense the resistance of my heart to taking the lowest and least place? Pray for the grace to be able to lay aside pride and take up the servant's towel. A heart reordered towards others is a heart which is growing in holiness.

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