

When confronted with Matthew's *Sermon on the Mount* we can often feel overwhelmed. It's too much, this standard of perfection – and exclusive. Who can belong when the expectations are so high? If the Law was a burden surely this is even more so. And then one begins to wonder if there isn't a certain irony at work. Jesus is putting the frighteners on us in imitation of the Pharisees:

*If your right eye should cause you to sin, tear it out and throw it away . . . and if your right hand should cause you to sin , cut it off and throw it away.*

But, as one commentator notes, this is a literary, not a literal way of speaking. The intention is indeed to shock. Recent commentators on climate change are rather good at this, too, as once again we experience high winds and heavy showers the phrase *There is no natural weather left* becomes all the more powerful and starts to do its work, forcing us either further into denial or to a process of conversion, to an often painful re-appraisal of one's real situation. In short, the *Sermon on the Mount* is designed to challenge us, to pull us up short, to present us with new possibilities to which we can either say 'yes' or 'no'. For the fact that there is no natural weather left has not robbed us of choice. Indeed, where Jesus may be going is to highlight both the necessity of good and the necessity of bad. I'm thinking here of a mystical take on reality such as that of Jacob Boehme, the peasant shoemaker of Görlitz in East Germany, who came to prominence as a mystic in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. In the words of the literary critic Caroline Spurgeon

*the central point of his philosophy is the fundamental postulate that all manifestation necessitates opposition...this law, which applies all through nature, divine and human alike, is that nothing can reveal itself without resistance, good can only be known through evil, and weakness through strength, just as light is only visible when reflected by a dark body.*

(p92 *Mysticism in English Literature*)

Now, I had to think hard about this because it raises the whole question of evil, but rather than ask, *Where does it come from?* it might be better to ask, *What is it for?*, confident that *all is one*. From this perspective, the unity of all creation, one can, perhaps, share Jacob Boehme's view and that of such as William Law, William Blake and Simone Weil, that the resistance of we might perceive as evil is necessary for us to learn how to love. Or, in the words of Simone Weil,

*Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love. It is this country that God has given us to love. He has willed that it should be difficult yet possible to love it.*

(For Love of Beauty)

Just think of that in terms of people, and in terms of weather. It's a challenge, but not an impossible one. Or, in the words of Ecclesiasticus

*If you wish you can keep the commandments to behave faithfully is within your power . . .*

*Man has life and death before him, whichever a man likes better will be given him.*

This is not an encouragement to sin. Yes, we can choose evil as much as good, but this only serves to make real the choice before us. Or, to Jacob Boehme once more, in the words of Caroline Spurgeon

*The object of all manifested nature is the transforming of the will which says 'No', into the will which says 'Yes'... (p.92)*

Not quite the meaning we hear at the end of today's gospel passage but highlighting the transparency needed to be open to God's will and made possible for us because God has entered this struggle too. We're not alone in this. In and through Christ, God's Spirit has entered the fray. Indeed,

*These are the very things God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God. (1 Cor. 2.10)*

Even, dare one say, where there is opposition within God between good and evil? This is not to be taken literally, of course.

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