

What God is after, in this most difficult of passages, is our coming to full maturity in Christ: we're being told that it's time to grow up, to realise and release God as our inner principle – the power at the centre of our lives who determines what we do or don't do. The examples seem impossible unless Christ *is* our inner principle, unless there is an inner dynamism which compels us in a way the law cannot so that we're not just approaching life as a means of navigating all the dos and don'ts that assail us but as a joyful embrace of the absurdity of God. It's a voyage of discovery which begins with the realisation that God is not out there with an impossible list of things to do or things to believe but already deep within us trying to get out. We are indeed tabernacles and temples of the Holy Spirit but have forgotten where we've put the key or, worse, deliberately hidden it or even thrown it away. This is where we need one another, when neighbour becomes our 'get out of jail' card, for free. Now, this is a long shot, but this is what I think I mean: from a recent article on the town of Fleetwood in Lancashire, a fishing port which has lost its fishing fleet and much of its meaning:

Fleetwood has always prized itself on its sense of community, which derives in some part from the days when men relied on each other during dangerous excursions to the (north side of Iceland), and when women supported each other during the long absences of their men . . . (Jane) Couch described growing up in the 70s. 'We had an amazing childhood, though we didn't have any money. It would run out while you waited for the men to come home. But you could just knock on and ask the neighbour for a fiver, or milk or whatever. Fleetwood was just like one big family. I could walk into any of the houses in our street without knocking. Three of the families on my side of the street were fishers. The others worked in the industry, in the factories or making the nets, or filleting the fish on the docks – we were all connected.'

(Luke Brown. *Guardian* 21.2.20)

Today, forty or so years later, it's a town, still, of desperate poverty, but an even more desperate poverty of spirit: it is isolation that is the killer now, and the rest of the article focusses on how the people, or at least some of them, are re-discovering their community skills, their skill as neighbours, to restore meaning and to rescue one another. God pushes this concept of neighbour to its extreme but also to its logical conclusion. For, if God is our maker and we are indeed made in God's image and likeness, then every other human being has something to say to us about God, and we to them, and has a deep connectivity with us in this possession of God's Spirit – or, at least, potentially so. So when we offer the other cheek or our cloak as well as our tunic, or go the extra miles, we're not trying to rub in our spiritual superiority in any way but rather seeking to awake in our neighbour something of that co-naturality, that sympathy for others, which makes us actually human. That this doesn't always work is no excuse for not trying, as the people of Fleetwood are finding out. For what God has done for us in Christ is to make just such a thing a possibility once again for us, that is the rediscovery of a common humanity. If God hasn't given up on us then we needn't give up on one another or on ourselves.

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