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A BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY

FIRST THINGS

Sketching out a Biblical view of spirituality means saying something first of all about how the Bible is to be approached, and also about what I mean by 'spirituality'.

Approaching the Bible A serious reader of the Bible, indeed even an alert casual reader, cannot help noticing the different character of the books of which it is made up, and may notice their different standpoints: for example, the different world views of the prophets and the Wisdom writers (Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, for example). In view of this, does it make sense to talk of a 'Biblical' view of spirituality (or indeed a Biblical view of anything), rather than the prophetic view, the historical view, or the perspective of wisdom? And within the prophetic view, is the approach taken by Jeremiah, say, consistent with that taken by Hosea?

How one responds to these questions will be, to a greater or lesser extent, determined by the reader's overall understanding of the Bible as *scripture*, that is, a book invested with divine authority. Like many things that all Christians have in common, the way the authority of the Bible is both derived and understood is a cause of division. For me, Christianity came alive when the Bible came alive, and that was through taking to heart the so-called critical approach – asking how the various books came to be written, noting the different emphases of the authors, the times in which they wrote, and the communities for whom they wrote, and so forth. It leads to a very different understanding to those who take what is generally described as a 'fundamentalist' approach, who do not ask these questions, and take the whole corpus as one and as literally true. In my view, this is a path of error, that leads us down a religious cul-de-sac. Although the critical approach highlights difference, it also enables a deeper appreciation of the core message of the Bible, and keeping this always in sight, it is, I believe, possible to speak of a 'Biblical view'.

Spirituality Spirituality is one of those chameleon words that have come to bear many meanings, and so it is important to be clear what I mean by it. I understand spirituality as a personal quality. To be human is to have a spirit; our spirit is the animating, life-giving part of our being. We are all spiritual beings, and our spirituality is the way our spirit expresses itself, our way of being in the world. Thus spirituality is not just a religious thing confined to 'spiritual' people; it is what animates our character and attitudes, gives us our values and our individuality. Our spirituality derives from our behaviour and our beliefs; it is a particular way of living and doing things, and it does not exist apart from the person or group that embodies it. It may be religious, and equally it may be secular – indeed, most spiritualities today are secular, resting generally on consumerist and utilitarian values. A Biblical spirituality is one that rests on the beliefs, values, attitudes and way of life that are witnessed to by the Bible.

Christian Spirituality Jesus gave these Biblical beliefs and values a particular expression, and a Christian spirituality is shaped by his teaching and the example of his life. The Christian spiritual journey is about seeking the abundant life that Jesus promised to those who put their faith in him. This promise is about personal growth, about transforming our spirituality, rooting it firmly in Christ. It is trusting, incarnational, righteous, and liberating.

TRUST

Taking the Bible as the story of a People, the starting point is the call of Abraham. He is portrayed as the archetypal man of faith, especially by St Paul and the author of the Letter to Hebrews. Abraham's virtue was that he trusted that God would be true to his promises. He set out on a journey of faith to a land he did not know, and so it was with all the Biblical heroes: Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Nehemiah, Jesus and Paul. Hearing the call of God and being willing to set out on a journey in trust seems to be the foundation of a Biblical spirituality; it is a spirituality of *response*. It is a way of living that originates with God and not with ourselves, and as a result it is both humbling and releasing. It is also universal, for the call of God is addressed to all, and may be heard by all and not only by some kind of spiritual elite. You don't have to be special to be holy!

Trust is the basis of true relationships. God calls us into a relationship with himself, and asks us to trust, just as he asked Abraham and the other Biblical heroes. Trust is essential to human relationships because there will always be an element of the unknown about another person, however familiar they are to us; everyone has an incommunicable and unknowable 'inner mystery'. Even those closest to us will to an extent always be both known and unknown. This mystery is evident in the riddle of the divine name: *I am who I am, or I will be who I will be*. Although the disciples spent three years as the close companions of Jesus, at the end they did not seem to have grasped who he was, or what he was about, so much so, that Jesus says to Philip, 'Have I been with you all this time and you still do not know me? ... Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in me?' (*John 14.9-10*) As with those closest to us, that fact that God is to an extent unknown and unknowable does not mean that we cannot trust him. And, as with our loved ones, we know enough to know that God is faithful and trustworthy.

Trust is also the basis of growth. The Biblical story shows a development in the perception of God: from a tribal war-lord to a suffering servant. And we are called to participate in that same growth in understanding – as St Augustine said, 'Give me faith that I may understand.' There is an openness to a Biblically based spirituality that challenges the oft-encountered religious attitude that wants it all cut and dried, neat and tidy. A trusting attitude is one that accepts that we proceed by glimpses. Elijah, for example, received no more than a glimpse of God when he was hidden in the cleft in the rock while the divine glory passed by, but this was enough to assure him of God's presence with him. In the same way the prophets received their revelations bit by bit, and not all at one time – glimpses of the truth apprehended at significant moments in the story of Israel. And their prophecies were, at best, only partially fulfilled; God is always ahead; we glimpse the imprint of where has been. Realising this is basic to a Biblical spirituality.

INCARNATION

The journey undertaken in trust is rooted in history and in life; its signposts are real events and real people. Biblical spirituality is not speculative; nor is it a special learning passed down from master to disciple, as in some Eastern religions. We undertake the journey as way of understanding God based on events that actually happened as recounted in the stories of scripture. No doubt, in the telling and the re-telling these stories have become embellished, and the original event that inspired them is to a degree unknown to us. The best example of this is the Exodus, which is most unlikely to have happened in the way the Bible tells the tale. If there was a water crossing very soon after the Israelites left Goshen (the area where they lived in Egypt), it is most likely to have been of an inland lake in that area, and not through the Red Sea hundreds of miles away which the fleeing hordes could not have reached in time. But that something happened, sufficiently portentous to motivate an oppressed group of slaves to rebel, and thereby to discover a new sense

of identity, cannot be in doubt, and in later times the community of faith saw in that event the decisive hand of God.

And so it is throughout the Bible: the prophets used events in history to declare the Will of God. Some events were public and of political significance, *e.g.* Jeremiah's warning to the southern kingdom of Judah that she faced impending disaster was motivated by the defeat of the northern kingdom of Israel at the hands of the Babylonians. Some events were private, *e.g.* Hosea using his experience of an unfaithful wife to call Israel back to faithfulness. In the NT Jesus uses people's everyday experience to speak of God, whether it is the lilies of the field, workers in the vineyard, the harvest, a wedding feast, or a local disaster like the collapse of the Tower of Siloam. Jesus himself was a real person; his birth, his journeys, his trial, death and resurrection were real events in time, and, as with the Exodus, the community of faith came to see in these events the decisive hand of God. T S Eliot described these moments as the point of intersection of the timeless with time, and in them God is glimpsed.

And so with us: a Biblical spirituality leads us to use the events of the world and of our lives to discern the hand of God – this year, this week, this day. The danger is that we will focus more on the good experiences than on the bad. The good times are usually where we begin, where we expect to feel the presence of God; we seek blessing, not judgement. But if the Bible teaches us anything it is that the deepest learning comes from the painful times. It was through defeat and exile that God taught Israel the error of her ways, a lesson, like us, that she found hard to learn. It was in the midst of the desolation of exile that the prophet known as Second Isaiah came to a new understanding of God: instead of the tribal champion of the Exodus, he saw God as the Suffering Servant who took the sins of his people on to himself, and it was this picture that took human form in Jesus. In the vanities of Israel's leaders who turned away from God and followed the ways of the world, the prophets saw the origin of the injustices suffered by the people, and, in the name of God, the leaders were denounced and required to change their ways. Looking at today's world, I can hear a prophet like Amos declaring that our racial problems are God's judgement on our colonial past; that our rising crime-rate and immorality are God's judgement on our materialism and individualism; that the anger that brought about the rise of *ISIS* and other militant Islamic movements is God's judgement on the West's rejection of his ways and its failure to seek justice and the common good. A Biblical spirituality is one where we are open to judgement.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

A Biblical spirituality founded on trust, and rooted in reality seeks to be shaped by the values of righteousness, which originate in the character of God. The Biblical picture of God changes as the story unfolds, and the understanding of the ethical character of God took time to develop. The God with whom Abraham had to bargain in order to save the few good people of Sodom and Gomorrah from being destroyed along with the wicked is scarcely ethical, oddly unaware of the injustice of his intended course of action – indeed, Abraham has to remind him that what he proposes to do is unjust: 'Far be it from you! Should not the judge of all the earth do what is just?' (*Genesis 18.25*) In the same way, the God of the Exodus is morally repellent. Not only are the plagues visited upon Egypt appalling acts of cruelty, but while thus seeking to humble Pharaoh, at the same time God hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he may inflict worse disaster upon him. Such capricious action condemns itself. It is not until the eighth century BC that the ethical character of God emerges clearly in the prophesy of Amos, who condemned greed, incest, deceit, perversion of justice and dishonesty *in the name of God*. He thunders against those who 'oppress the helpless and grind down the poor – seek good, and not evil, that you may live, that the LORD, the God of Hosts,

may be with you.' (*Amos 4.1; 5.14*) It is a theme that echoes throughout the prophets: Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all contain oracles to the same effect.

The prophets reminded Israel that God is concerned with inner intention, with what motivates our thoughts and actions, and this, of course, was Jesus' concern also. In the Sermon on the Mount he directs attention away from the letter of the law to the values that lie behind the rules, and in doing so he imposes a more demanding morality than the prophets. Thus it is not sufficient to do no murder; simply nursing anger against another is wrong. Nor is it sufficient not to commit adultery; simply looking on another with a 'lustful eye' is to have committed adultery in one's heart. Notably, Jesus says that his followers must not suppose that he came to abolish the law and the prophets: 'I did not come to abolish, *but to complete.*' (*Matt 5.17*) Jesus 'completes' by making plain the inner intention of the law and the prophets' message. To the same purpose are the woes against the Pharisees: hypocrisy and moral sleight of hand are uncompromisingly condemned. St Paul, too, constantly exhorted his converts to moral lives. A Biblical spirituality rests on high moral values, not just in individual conduct, but, as the prophets continually witnessed, in public and commercial life also. Whether in the home or at work, in private and in public, we are to show that same generous concern for others as God shows to us.

LIBERATION

Liberation is what a Biblical spirituality leads to, and this, it seems to me, is *the* theme of the whole Bible. Liberation from oppression is what the Exodus was about; liberation from all that separates us from God is what the prophets were about; and liberation from restricting religious rules and learning to live in the love of God, enjoying the freedom that God gives, is what Jesus is about.

Liberation is what the love of God is about, and it is in response to that love that the believer offers her or his life to God in baptism, and sets out on a new path of life. In the love of God we know that we are accepted and forgiven. To know that our sins are forgiven (literally: put away or covered), and that we are both loveable and beloved, is truly liberating. The object of a Biblical spirituality is to make that sense of liberation real in the life of the believer, to help us appropriate the gift of freedom that God offers. The gift is appropriated through the virtue of humility, a basic attitude or disposition of the heart, that removes us and our desires from centre stage, and allows us to reach out to God and to receive from God.

Liberation is a gift, but like all God's gifts it is to be used for others and not just kept as a private possession. So a Biblical spirituality issues in action, motivating us to work to break down barriers that imprison and enslave the human spirit, and as a result, Christians have been active in the fight against slavery, violence, wrongful discrimination, sexual exploitation, the oppressive use of power, self-interest and corruption. A Biblical spirituality necessarily involves us in concerns that are usually thought of as political rather than religious, but the Christian motivation is not party political, but based on the teaching of Jesus who, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, taught that our neighbour is anyone in need, irrespective of race, creed, or status. We do not take Man as the measure of all things, but God, who is the Lord of all, and thus a Biblical spirituality rejects the compartmentalisation of life: public and private, religious and political, home and work; whatever we do, whether in the holy place or in the market place is equally part of our worship, our offering to God.