'THE REVALUATION OF ALL VALUES'

Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises

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I TEACH BIBLICAL STUDIES AT OXFORD and am an Anglican priest. I have for the last two years commuted between Oxford and Cambridge while my children were able to find appropriate points in their education to make the move to Oxford. In the context of the dislocation and readjustment resulting from a change in job, the importance of the Spiritual Exercises has been such that it is very tempting to begin this essay by an exhaustive description of how I came to do them, and to offer a detailed inventory of my spiritual state when I embarked upon them. It is not because I am particularly defensive that I intend to resist this. Indeed, far from it: I am the kind of person who is not usually backward in sharing his inadequacies and anxieties. But that whole process of self-revelation would be to fall into one of the traps that I have identified as a besetting sin during the time that I have been doing the Exercises. That process is a subtle form of narcissism, the identification of which I regard as one of the most important gifts from God which came through the Exercises. So I shall have to disappoint the reader who wants a detailed spiritual diary. Suffice it to say that professionally, spiritually and emotionally I was at a low ebb. Conversations with friends had persuaded me that, whatever the other causes of the problems I might be having with my life, there was a significant 'spiritual' dimension which had to be tackled. So it was that I came to embark on the Exercises eighteen months ago. I did so not as part of a formal retreat but in the course of living my everyday life. Circumstances made any other course of action at the time rather difficult, but I am resolved to repeat the process in the more concentrated environment of a retreat in the near future. The 'everyday' element had the obvious advantage that many of the issues which were to occupy me were matters which were very much 'alive' as I spent my time with the Exercises. My guide through the Exercises was a priest whose gentle direction placed so much of the responsibility on me before God. I am in retrospect profoundly grateful for his supportive, yet non-intrusive, part in the process. It was my wife, Catherine's, decision to embark on the

Exercises six months or so before me which was a major reason for my decision to explore the same process. It had clearly been a formative experience for her, and I thought it might help me at the difficult juncture in which I had found myself.

A major hurdle in embarking upon the Exercises was at the very start. I found myself enormously resistant to the First Principle and Foundation. It is difficult to put my finger exactly on the problem now. I can best illustrate it by sharing some of my initial resentment (though as I recall it I find my reaction rather naïve now!). I have for many years been involved in one way or another with Third-World issues both personally and professionally. I have tentatively explored what an option for the poor might mean in the context of my work as a theologian in Oxbridge and had been part of a variety of groups and networks engaged with justice and peace issues. Liberation theology had become a central motivating influence in my life. So when there was no mention of service of humanity and solidarity with the outcast as the cornerstone of divine service and the emphasis seemed instead to be narrowly religious I initially rebelled. But, while briefly stumbling over this obstacle, I struggled to come to terms with that which stood in my way. As a result I am beginning to learn that my overriding attachment to what seems to me to be the central feature of the gospel of Jesus Christ needs to be placed before God, to seek to avoid an insidious temptation for the good intention or cause to become a mask for self-centredness, with the consequence that the concerns of God may be subordinated to the satisfaction of self-interest.

I have to confess that in the first instance I approached the Exercises more as a psychological technique than as a 'spiritual' discipline. I did not doubt that their ability as an aid to contemplation and self-examination had been proved by centuries of use. It was that kind of psychological 'servicing' that I had in mind as I embarked upon them. What I had not bargained for was that the God who had been an object of my study and a part of the fabric of the Exercises that I was engaged in should also be discovered to be the gracious instigator and sustainer of the whole process. Or rather, that in praying for grace I should find myself being searched out rather than doing the searching. That is a pretty depressing confession to have to make, particularly from an ordained minister. Perhaps it is symptomatic of the outlook of our age, though I suspect that it is something far more widespread in human experience and that our age is no worse than any other. I think that it is the same disease that Deutero-Isaiah and the other prophets were talking about when they condemned idolatry and offered a vision of a

God who was beyond the bounds of our definitions and meagre expectations.

That idolatry can best be summarized in my case as a preoccupation with self, however dressed up it might be in more acceptable guises, which I found remorselessly exposed as I moved through the Exercises. It was an experience of being searched out and known, as the Psalmist puts it. Or, mindful of the imagery of the opening chapters of the Apocalypse, it was as if the deepest parts of me were being minutely examined by the many eyes of the Lamb that was slain. I found that the parts of me which I regarded as most akin to the spirit of Christ had subtly been co-opted into a regime of fear and defensiveness which led me away from God and others. I began to see how anxiety and a sense of 'having to live up to my reputation' were continually impoverishing my life and conspired to undermine both a sense of self and vocation. So it was that those things which have been such an important part of my identity and potentially spiritual turned out often to be the snare which could trap me in a personal slough of despond and a self-centredness which threatened to cut me off from God. I could resonate with Paul's experience in Romans 7 and glimpsed the importance of the Apocalypse describing the Lamb and the Beast in remarkably similar terms, for the angels of light and of darkness are difficult to distinguish. That which was good and had become such a part of the fabric of my being had been subtly recruited to undermine and diminish. While I cannot pretend that I have overcome the patterns of existence of a lifetime, I can see much more clearly the ways in which preoccupation with myself and my safety had for a time been impoverishing my service of God as well as my sense of myself. Learning what it meant to place the service of Almighty God at the centre of my life has offered me a glimpse of liberation.

I suspect most people who embark on the Ignatian Exercises find themselves entranced by the imaginative study of scripture in which the reader is asked to identify with various aspects of the story and in imagination understand the whole array of factors which the scriptural story evokes. My professional occupation is the exegesis of Holy Scripture and so I have a variety of reasons for interest in biblical interpretation. I have for many years been interested in the creative application of scripture to the situations of the poor in the Basic Christian Communities of Latin America, so there was a degree of familiarity with the immediate engagement with the scripture that I was being asked to adopt. Nevertheless I did find that I was being made to think again about some of my attitudes to biblical interpretation as a professional exegete.

I do not believe that exegesis is an arcane activity but that it is in principle open to anyone. *Critical* exegesis (which is what most professional exegetes are engaged in) demands a degree of self-awareness of the variety of factors which determine one's quest for understanding. The Exercises reminded me how much of exegesis is usually confined to the reconstruction of the original meaning and context and how often the understanding of criticism is confined to the avoidance of religious prejudice. Of course, the biblical books are part of the extant literature of the ancient world and so have a place within the construction of the history of that world. I would not want to devalue the importance of the historical enterprise over the years. The historical approach to scripture has given us a sense of the 'otherness' of scripture and some fascinating insights into how our ancestors in the faith struggled with issues relating faith and life. Their ideas are not always the same as ours, nor may scripture be used in any straightforward way to 'answer' our contemporary questions. A historical approach will obviously generate historical interest but will also offer a resource for those who want to assess the degree of continuity which exists between their own lives and the struggles, fears and hopes of the people whose lives are reflected in the pages of the Bible.

A historical reading of scripture is by no means the only component of a challenging and critical exegesis, despite our ready assumption that in the last two hundred years or so we are the first to read scripture 'properly'. It is easy to forget that biblical criticism did not start with the Enlightenment. Jewish and Christian interpreters have explored a variety of methods. Such interpretation has included literal and allegorical exegesis, and the recognition that texts can offer a level of meanings too easily ignored by a rather monochrome preoccupation with past history. Allowing for the 'spiritual' and personal nature of the way scripture is used in the Exercises I frequently found that my perspective on the text was being subjected to a searching critique and I was offered fresh insight into the text which a narrow historical focus excluded. Above all else the Exercises brought home to me the awareness that the biblical texts are religious texts and are a resource for exploration of what a life in obedience to God may involve. And by religious I do not mean that narrow sense of the word which is so common today. What the Exercises compelled me to face up to was the need to see how spirituality informed and subverted assumptions in every component of existence, not least in my professional activity as a biblical scholar. Obedience to God, prayer and service do not usually count as critical components but are (wrongly in my view) seen as necessarily leading to

bias and lack of objectivity. There is a fear that to assert the importance of their religious dimension in some sense diminishes any critical perspective. My experience of doing the Exercises suggests to me that the reverse is the case. The use of scripture in the context of worship and as part of the ongoing life of communities of faith is an important resource for exegesis which aims to be critical. What is more, the dominant concern of criticism with the analytical needs to be balanced by the opportunity offered by worship for contemplation and imagination. In this respect the Ignatian use of scripture is particularly helpful. The emphasis on obedience to God can prevent that sense of superiority and hardness of heart which quenches the fructifying experience of reading with insight and understanding. Careful exploration before God of interests (economic, political, philosophical as well as religious) that we bring to the text is a necessary part of developing a critical awareness: after all 'where our heart is there will our treasure be also'. Where exegesis of any kind (whether carried out in an academic environment or not) is viewed merely as a theoretical enterprise cut off from our wider context in a world dominated by poverty and suffering or the service of Almighty God, important ingredients will be lacking.

I feel uneasy with the word 'spirituality' with its dualistic and restrictive connotations. One of the things which Christianity demands of us is a renunciation of the resort to splits in existence. Dualism has been a part of religious experience throughout the history of the Church. It takes different forms: separation between God and the world; religion and politics; soul and body; and in more everyday terms between different parts of existence. We learn to cope with the difficulties of existence by 'splitting' our outlook and perception of things. Often we may see no contradiction between one part of life and another. But Christian discipleship demands something different. We are not permitted to resort to dividing our existence in such a way that we are relieved of the contradictions of life by pretending that we can compartmentalize existence. For me one challenge has always been to learn to keep together theology and the reality of our world with its suffering and injustice. It would be easy to take refuge in a theology which is exemplary in academic terms and perhaps even offer enlightenment to those who are interested to learn more of an academic subject. It is because I am suspicious of the separation between religion and life that I am also uneasy about an approach to theology which presses for its autonomy over against the life of worship and the commitments of discipleship. I am reminded of the words of Gustavo Gutierrez who has always stressed the roots of liberation theology in the contemplation of God:

> Contemplation and commitment within history are fundamental dimensions of Christian practice . . . The mystery reveals itself through prayer and solidarity with the poor . . . contemplation and commitment combine to form what may be called the phase of silence before God . . . Silence is the condition for any living encounter with God in prayer and commitment . . . Theology is talk that is constantly enriched by silence. (*The truth shall make you free*, p 3)

The exploration of the things of God is not to be done outside that critical environment provided by divine worship. Everything, whether it be the preferential option for the poor, the most sublime spirituality or sophisticated theological argument, is submitted to the judgement of God. That demands a life which is sensitive to the probing of divine grace as well as enriched by it. Too often theology done by Protestants is conceived independently of the religious demands which are such a central feature of the Exercises. While I do not see that environment as an infallible prophylactic against false theology or religion, I have discovered that it must be an essential ingredient of it.

At roughly the same time that I was doing the Exercises I was working on the Gospel of Matthew and its contribution to the study of early Jewish mysticism and was struck by the theme throughout of Jesus' solidarity with the humble and humiliated. I started work exploring the attitude of the Gospels to the poor and marginalized. But it was instead the picture of a Christ as a humble king and the particular privilege of the humble to understand things which the wise and understanding were blind to.

For example, in chapter 18 the disciples ask Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. He answers by taking a child and instructing the disciples to become like children. So, just as fulfilling the needs of the hungry and the thirsty in Matthew 25:31ff means acting in that way to the heavenly Son of Man, receiving a child means receiving Jesus (v.5). I still find this to be a surprising perspective. This is not because of any sentimentality towards childhood or because I think that children are particularly innocent. Rather it is all part of the challenge of Jesus to conventional values about status, and the nature of adulthood which the gospel so probingly explores. To place a child in the midst of the disciples is to challenge the assumption that the child has nothing of worth and can only be heeded when it has imbibed an adult's wisdom. But the adult world, at least that of the dominant elements of society, is not the embodiment of wisdom and may in fact be a perversion of it. Here is a perspective which has challenged so many of our assumptions. Identification with the child is a mark of greatness, and it is the children

and those who identify with their lot who have solidarity with the humble.

That is a theme which runs throughout the Gospel of Matthew. At the heart of Matthew's picture of Christ is the deliberate identification of 'God with us' with the powerless and the weak rather than the strong. At the very start of the Gospel Immanuel is a child who is faced with the brutal repression of the rulers in Jerusalem. As the child of God *par excellence* there is concern and identification with the lot of the down-trodden. Their lot is one that the humble Messiah chose to share: 'Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have their nests but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head' (Matt 8:20). As a child he is the victim of persecution and deliberately offers himself as a humble king whose followers must espouse similar humility. As one in a position of eminence in my professional life, it has been a salutary experience to explore the meaning of following a humble king in circumstances where status, honour, charisma and brilliance count for a great deal. To be like a child, to learn what 'solidarity of the humiliated' means in practice (to quote the German biblical scholar Klaus Wengst) is a necessary, but difficult, vocation in the world in which I live and work. But to explore that without persisting in defending myself and my vulnerable ego involves a delicate spiritual balance which I am sure will be a constant theme of discipleship.

So the Exercises did not allow me to compartmentalize the bits of my life. Rather, I found myself being gently pressed at a speed with which I could cope and without too much personal upheaval. For me it is a hard lesson to learn that there is no escape from taking seriously the nature of Jesus' solidarity with the poor and finding that this cannot merely be a matter of rhetoric but must also be a cornerstone of everyday living. It is that quest for integrity which the Exercises have enabled me to take up with renewed endeavour. Over the months since I did the Exercises I have been aware of a framework for existence that the experience has bequeathed. It is at one and the same time an inspiration and a discomfort, the latter because I am continually being reminded about the 'revaluation of all values' which it confronted me with. Those words of Nietzsche with which he concludes *The Antichrist* (how ironic that one of its greatest despisers should have perceived so clearly so much that is at the heart of our religion!) have come to epitomize the challenge of the gospel. In one outburst about the Church Fathers Nietzsche wrote, 'Nature was neglectful when she made them – she forgot to endow them with even a modest number of respectable, decent, cleanly instincts . . . between ourselves, they are not even men . . .' That's the heart of the

matter, isn't it? In a 'macho' culture the way of Christ cuts across all those 'respectable' virtues. Those who would be disciples have to learn what it means to take up a cross and follow him. I consider that I began to do that in earnest when I imbibed and digested the wisdom of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola.