

‘Being Christian as the call to be fully human’ by Jonathan Mosedale from St Matthews Moot Community.

If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? (Luke 9:23-26)

We are called to deny ourselves, to be ready to lose our life in order to save it. Yet too often we respond to Christ’s words by a frustrated quest to escape our true nature. Unhappy with the nature we have been given, we try to re-shape it to the image of our own ambitions. Unfortunately free will is a fragile thing compared with the intransigence of our own nature, and we end easily by hating ourselves, like a want-to-be artist surrounded by past works that all bear witness to his failure.

We receive everything, both life and happiness; but the manner in which we receive, this is what is still ours. Let us, then, receive trustfully without shame or anxiety. Let us humbly accept from God even our own nature, and treat it charitably, firmly, intelligently. Not that we are called upon to accept the evil and the disease in us, but let us accept ourselves in spite of the evil and the disease. (Henri Frederic Amiel - Journal)

Christ’s words are not a demand to flee from ourselves but rather a call to holiness; that is to wholeness. It is only through the humble acceptance of our nature that we may begin to tread the path he has laid out for us.

It is not as if church tradition and scripture do not bear witness to this truth. How easily we forget that God created man in his own image (Gen 1:27) or that He *saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good* (Gen1:31). However many theological somersaults we may perform around the fall and original sin, we remain created in the divine image.

And have we forgotten the full sense of the incarnation: that God was made man and dwelt among us? We say the words yet slip into the habit of considering Jesus as some form of hybrid; the less agreeable aspects of his humanity replaced with a purifying dose of divine perfection. Yet the church long since settled the doctrinal disputes over the nature of Christ, and we worship a Christ who is fully God *and* fully human, so that, in the rather archaic words of the thrity-nine articles, *two whole and perfect Natures, that is to say Godhead and Manhead, were joined together in one Person, never to be divided, whereof is one Christ, very God and very Man*. Wholeness and perfection are here equated the one with the other.

In a similar way, we gloss over those Gospel passages where Jesus expresses impatience, anger or doubt. All too often our exegesis seeks to render Christ not fully human but inhuman, devoid of the very emotions that make us what we are. Hardly surprising that often we seek to escape these very same emotions.

Perhaps the most destructive aspect of this failure to love our selves is its selfishness. What time have we left for others when we are forever worrying about our own lack of worth? Nicholas Berdyaev in the *Destiny of Man* addresses the issue more directly than many: *“One of the sources of human suffering is disgust with oneself and inability to feel any self-love. There is self-love which we ought to have in accordance with God’s will. We ought to love ourselves as God’s creation and love the Divine image and likeness in us. We must love*

our neighbours as ourselves. This implies that we must love ourselves too and respect the image of God in us. Such a love is opposed to egoism and egocentricity, i.e. to the madness of putting oneself at the centre of the universe.”

If religion served no other function than to remind us that we are not gods then it would play a worthy role. We forget our mortality all too easily, becoming ill content when we fail to live up to the divine nature we assume upon ourselves. William Blake in his Vision of the Final Judgement writes: *It is not because Angels are Holier than Men or Devils that make them Angels, but because they do not Expect Holiness from one another but from God alone.* Like the angels we should be modest in our expectations of each other and of ourselves. Questing after perfection does not bring us closer to God.

Of course, it is no easy matter. It is no coincidence that the faults that we find hardest to tolerate are those that we recognise in ourselves. Accepting our true nature is no passive choice – quite the opposite. It requires facing up to who we are, and finding ways to respond with our whole nature to Christ’s call. *What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?*

It is particularly in prayer that we seem least able to be ourselves, saying only those things that we think will bring approval and reward. We need to remember that God made us as we are – and though we should praise him for the gift of life, why should we not lay before him life’s sorrows and confusions? More unfaithful surely is seeking to escape the very nature that he gave us. It is by being true to ourselves, in word and deed, that we will find it easiest to come closer to our Creator, who in our scripture is so often portrayed with more emotion and failings than we permit ourselves.

*Ah my deare angrie Lord,
Since thou dost love, yet strike;
Cast down, yet help afford;
Sure I will do the like.
I will complain, yet praise;
I will bewail, approve:
And all my sowre-sweet dayes
I will lament, and love.*

George Herbert – *Bittersweet*