

It is almost impossible to escape the conclusion that Jesus was not interested in political authority or the structures that supported it; he was not 'politically-minded'; he looked not to the law, but to the heart. In all his teaching he sought to address the inner person, the interior religious and spiritual impulses that shape out daily lives. Our souls, if you like. Sometimes, perhaps, it doesn't make sense to our contemporary minds that he does not speak about the social injustices of his day, or the state politics that allowed them to flourish. His aim and purpose was always to direct the consciousness of his listeners towards a dimension that transcends every legal, social and political circumstance. And his angry sorrow was aimed at those who were the cause of *religious* bondage, *spiritual* oppression. This transcendent dimension he called 'the kingdom of God' and the chief representatives of those who would prevent people entering its gates, was the clerical status quo: Sadducees, Pharisees, scribes and lawyers. In Matthew 23: 3-4, he says of them:

"For they (the scribes and Pharisees) do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to help them."

And to their faces he says:

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in."

Religious and spiritual oppression Jesus was most certainly interested in. The disciples were the first to be confused and disappointed by Jesus' disinterest in the political situation; most of them, until very near the end, thought that he would lead the people up in victorious rebellion against the occupying power of Rome. Indeed, the widespread and common understanding was that the Messiah would do exactly this and would, therefore, be a *political* figure. It did not really occur to the disciples who followed him that he was a *spiritual* Messiah. This is why his trial, sentence and crucifixion came as such a shocking tragedy to them. Jesus' avoidance of political matters could not be made more clear than here, in today's gospel reading: he refuses to condemn a crippling tax levied on the people by the Roman authorities; it is certainly true that he gives the answer he does to avoid the trap set for him by his enemies, but his disinterest in Rome, Roman power and the local Roman government, is unambiguous. He also mixed freely and dined with tax collectors, who were held in contempt, because they were Jews who collected the tax on behalf of the provincial Roman governor.

The kingdoms and empires of this world and the kingdom of God are two distinct realities in the gospels. This is probably most clearly delineated in John:

“Whoever loves his life loses it, but whoever loses his life in this world will keep it for eternity.” (12.25)...

“The world will make you suffer, but be brave: for I have overcome the world.” (16:33)...

“I am not asking you to remove them from the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. Because they do not belong to this world any more than I do.” (17: 16-17)...

“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would have fought to prevent my arrest. But my kingdom is not of this world.” (18:36).

And in his first letter, St John says:

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them.”

What is highlighted in John’s gospel is also suggested in Matthew, Mark and Luke and – particularly – in the letters of St Paul, which of course were written before any of the gospels. In his Letter to the Romans, he says:

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (12:2).

St James, maybe having a bad day, puts it even more starkly, with a hint of irritated petulance:

“You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” (4:4).

So then, there is this dichotomy to be acknowledged and faced in the New Testament writings: that the world and

the world of the kingdom of God, whatever name it is given, are at loggerheads. This idea is expressed in nearly all the scriptures of the world's great faiths; Jalal Rumi, the Sufi mystic and poet said:

“I saw that we are God's shadow; and the world is our shadow.”

I think there are one or two points to consider that might help resolve this paradox.

For me, the first point to make is that Jesus did not hate the created world; so many of his parables used natural things – wine, vineyards, oil, flowers, figs, the weather, yeast and dough – and he even once compared himself to a mother hen. The natural world, although it can be cruel and bloody, is shot through – as Gerard Manley-Hopkins poetically observed – with the glory of God. Jesus also enjoyed being invited to dine and because of this was accused by the Pharisees of being a glutton and a drunkard. The world of mountains and rivers and oceans and animals is not to be despised but celebrated – as Jesus himself did. The world that John, James, Peter and the other evangelists write so negatively of, is that of power, ambition, oppression, corruption, greed and injustice, which has been imposed upon the created order by wayward human will. In the gospel account of the temptation of Jesus, it says:

“Then the devil took him up to a high place and showed him all the kingdoms and empires of the world in a single

moment. And he said: 'I will give you all of these if you will bow down and worship me.'"

The devil was able to offer Jesus all these kingdoms and empires because *they already belonged to him...* you can't give away what you don't own. The Roman occupation machine governed by a despot with unlimited power, was the epitome of these kingdoms and empires. In our age only the names have changed – the power, corruption and greed remain the same.

The second point, I think, would be this: Jesus did not engage with these kingdoms and empires – he was silent before them as he was silent before Herod. There is something too deep for explanation when innocence and goodness encounters evil, even human evil at its worst: silence is the only possible response. Jesus saw no shred of natural human decency in Herod and so could not touch his ice-cold heart with any warming pity – and he would not have resisted Herod's malice in any case; the silence of non-engagement was inevitable. In the gospel reading today, he simply says about paying tax to one of the most militaristic and ruthless of empires: 'Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.' In other words, Caesar and the world he represented, had nothing to do with God. The Lord's answer was a brilliant parry, of course, but it also – and perhaps more importantly – reveals a deep spiritual truth.

What do we do, then, we who for a longer or shorter spell reside in a world of multiple contemporary Caesars? Jesus himself provides the answer: we must be *in* it, but not *of* it. Quoting our Lord, as it sometimes does, the Koran says:

“The Master Jesus, Son of Mary, blessings and peace be upon him, said that this world is like a bridge: you may cross over it, but do not build your house on it.”

And in the Letter to the Hebrews, written some six hundred years before, it is written:

“For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” (13:14).

To be in the world but not of it. We can't simply reject the world and everything it contains, because a lot of what it contains is grace-filled and blessed and joyous and good – anyone who has a beloved pet or a beautifully-tended garden or who knows the joy of shared food and wine, or has a passion for music or art, or who has cherished grandchildren, knows this instinctively. When Jesus tells us to be in the world but not of it, he is encouraging us to love what is loveable, to find joy wherever joy is to be found, to be thankful for every day that we are alive. This is the way of living that the prophet Micah expressed with a simple yet poignant elegance:

‘Live justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God.’ (Micah 6:8)

It is one of the most lovely crystallisations of how to be in this world yet not of it: to live justly in the midst of

injustice and inequality, to love tenderly in a society hallmarked by sexualisation, pornography and moral indifference, to walk humbly with our God among the strident screams of militant atheism and the pessimistic philosophies of materialism.

But what of the practicalities of such a way of life? It may be all very well to proclaim its worthiness, but how is it to be actually lived in the concrete here-and-now of every day? I reckon the idea of *beauty* is invaluable here. Philosophers and theologians ancient and modern, pagan and Christian – from Plato to von Balthasar – have known that beauty is one of the purest and most effective vessels of the divine, one of the most mystical yet most accessible paths – quite a combination in itself! – to God. We have to start, in however modest a way, with ourselves. We have to see the beauty within us. That's the hardest part! It has nothing to do with physical beauty or the way we look (God forbid), or even with whatever is in our minds and hearts: our beauty is, radically, in *the very fact* of our existence. To 'be' is to be beautiful, because whatever exists – being itself – is one, true, good and beautiful. To be alive, then, is to be alive to the beauty of our own existence.

How can we live this truth? By perceiving or creating beauty in our lives. Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

“Never miss an opportunity to see the beauty in things, because beauty is God's handwriting.”

Well, in our own modest way, we can try a bit of handwriting for ourselves. To strive, however difficult or uncomfortable it may seem at first, to perceive the beauty in others – oh, not any physical or personal beauty to be sure, but simply the beauty of *the fact of their existence*. Which is, of course, exactly the same as our own. Small wonder Jesus exhorted us: ‘Love your neighbour *as yourself*.’ It doesn’t matter who it might be, it could easily be anyone our eye happens to alight on – in the street, the checkout queue, the hairdresser or barber, the local shop, wherever – just to remind ourselves: that person’s existence, in itself, shares in the beauty of God.

To smile at another even though we don’t feel like it, to give to someone in need without admitting to ourselves that the giving ever happened (this is an incredibly important condition), to spend time with the prolix and the tedious, to be interested in the dull, to affirm the emotionally bankrupt, to sit and be with someone on their spiritual path: all these acts are loving, therefore they are beautiful, because as St Augustine said:

“When love grows within you, so beauty grows, for love is the beauty of the soul.”

We cannot do something beautiful without bringing not just ourselves, but the whole world that little bit closer to God.

We can also beautify our own personal space with things that we love, things we find beautiful, that remind us

of the transcendental reality of divine beauty. The most important personal space to be beautified, however, is our mind. In his Letter to the Philippians. St Paul says:

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.” (4:8).

I think most of us, for a time and to a degree, at least, can manage that. And if we can, we are truly living *in* this world, without being *of* it.