

Being Good Enough – Living Virtuously

This week a young man came to see me, a student at my college in Oxford who was struggling with ‘perfectionism’; a very bright young man who wanted to get everything right. The difficulty in managing the standard of the work in his final year, a serious relationship, his life as a Christian and his own view of himself as a kind and compassionate friend was becoming too much and his sense of failing to get it all right was beginning to depress him.

He put me in mind of another young man trying to find out how to get it all right. This young man approached Jesus and asked ‘What Good thing shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ All three of the synoptic gospels record this story. He seems to be asking ‘how to get it right’. What do I need to do to have done enough? Jesus points him to the scriptures, ‘if you want to know what to do that is good then look to the commandments’.

Yet, it seems the man wants a definitive answer some kind of clue for where to concentrate. Jesus offers a summary and with the arrogance of youth is told. Oh I have done all of that. What else. And here we have that wonderful response from Jesus, Mark’s gospel says he looks at him with love as he says ‘if you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give to the poor then follow me.’ (Mark 10:17-31) This is not what he wanted to hear and he goes away sad.

Jesus hears the young man’s need for getting it right. He responds to the implied rather than the asked question – not what do I do to get eternal life but ‘If you wish to be perfect.’ If that is what the young man wants he will find that it is an impossible aim. Jesus tells a joke, about a camel and the eye of a needle - we are not quite sure how the joke works! But we see the shock of the disciples. If a righteous, commandment keeping, wealthy young man cannot get it right then who on earth can? If wealth – a recognised sign of God’s blessing in their culture – was not a guarantor of being on the right road then what help for the rest? ‘For humans it is impossible but for God all things are possible.’

This passage fascinates me because I think it speaks so powerfully into our modern day world where people long for a formula, a way to feel that they can get it all right. Perfection is held out as a possibility and it is fed by the myth of perfect control.

In student ministry I constantly deal with a perfectionism that has become paralysing. Young people who want to get it all right and who are desperately looking for the correct formula to get there. The current school exam system does not help, on so many papers it is possible to get 100% and the good schools know how the bright kids can learn to tailor the answers in the best possible way to hit the target. A*, Perfect, All correct, gold star and people feel validated and secure knowing they are Good.

They can feel in control.

The myth of perfect control is wider than the education system it is all around us. To be in control is to be secure and safe protected from all that we fear. Adverts on the television tell us that we can use products to 'kill all germs' implying that if we do this we can keep our loved ones free from disease. Certain food stuffs will promote healthy bacteria, lower our cholesterol, sharpen our ability to deal with disorder and if we eat these we are in control of our health and wellbeing. Along with the culture of control goes the mantra of choice. We have choices and these then become our responsibility. If we choose right all will be well but poor choices will, of course, at some level mean we get what we deserve!

In many areas of work including our current education system we are urged to measure up to defined targets, competencies and grade boundaries. We can if we are clever learn the formulas to get it all right and then be rewarded. Gold stars, plenty of ticks for our completed tick boxes; affirmation that we are doing it right.

Living within this understanding of reality it can be all too easy, like the rich young man, to say yes I have done that. For him the commandments were a check list and he could confidently state that he had not violated any of them. He was a model of righteousness and yet something was clearly missing. The wording is interesting he wanted to possess eternal life – have it hold it at some level own it. He needed some kind of guarantee that he was on course.

Jesus challenges him to do something radical – let go of all of your security, all that you possess, all that defines you, all that you have achieved. Notice the poor and do something for them and then come and follow me.

The man goes away saddened and well he might he wanted certainty and insight into how to be perfect he was offered uncertainty, risk, loss of status and an adventurous future with no clear sense of what it would entail.

There is much in life where effort applied in the right place will lead to good results. There are plenty of ways in which we are able to make good choices and take responsibility for our lives but there is much of life which does not work like that. What this young man needed was to learn to look differently at the world and his place in it. The commandments were not given as a check list to be ticked off, but as pointers to that fundamental commandment of Loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves. They are about relationship not rules. Paul in the New Testament is at pains to help people understand this centrality of relationship – simply trying to keep the rules is deadening, seeking to live a life in relationship with God, shaped by the commandments, is possible because when we let God in we find the grace to live well.

Living in our culture we are not immune from the myth of control. We find our security in lots of different ways and for many of us our need to be validated can lead us into a desperate seeking after perfectionism. The motivation to get it right is a good one but it needs to be tempered with a realistic understanding of what is and is not within our control. This means we need a different concept than ‘perfection’.

We can control many things in our lives yet in different ways at different times reality seeps in and we find the randomness of the things we cannot control. The carefully monitored diet has no effect on the rare cancer that simply mutated deep within the body’s cells for reasons medics do not understand.

The ordered life comes up uncomfortably against the disordered life of another, the careless driver, the financially insolvent parent, the unsympathetic boss or the unruly child- and suddenly there is the realisation that our lives are interwoven at levels we do not control as these others move haphazardly so they knock us off course, trip us up or untidy our neatly ordered lives.

And as we know events in far off places can send ripples out that destabilise our security. Unlikely people come to power in ways that affect our economy, our security and the very fabric of the planet on which we live. We cannot control these things; some of them we can do little to influence. A financial crash can lead to job loss for us and for those we depend on. The loss of a large local employer can radically change the neighbourhood in which we live and work.

Dwindling resources of oil underpin wars and political tensions. Climate change leads to droughts, migration and international tensions.

The rich young man's certainty, his religious orthodoxy and his many possessions would not and could not make him immune to the uncertainties of the human condition.

And, which is important for us to remember, much that is joyful and wonderful is outside our control. Falling in love, the sunlight on the garden, a deep and long standing friendship, the meeting of minds, shared laughter, the gift of a child and those glimpses of the divine. Yes we can do things to make these more possible, but they depend on others, on timing, on happenstance and grace.

There are some things where control is important where knowing the rules and following the rubrics leads to the right result. To bake a cake requires the right combination of ingredients and the correct temperature. Driving safely from A to B requires control of the car, a clear understanding of the route; without either of those there could be disaster or you might be very lost. Such ways of being and doing have recognisable ends. We can taste and see whether the cake is good, we know if we have arrived safely at the correct place. Yet, such ways of being and doing are only one aspect of human life.

Philosophers call this mix of uncertainties that we live in 'contingencies'; they are the reality as opposed to the abstract way of living. The stuff that happens which we have to find a way to live with. In a world that is a complicated mix between what we can control and much that is random or controlled by others perfection, getting it right, controlling all the options is not possible but that does not mean we have to accept a fatalistic slide into despair. We can and we should be doing our best to be 'good enough'. And to be good enough we need to develop virtues as opposed to rules.

Let me unpick those terms for you.

Firstly to be 'good enough' is not some kind of settling for mediocrity. Some of you may recognise it as a term I have borrowed from Donald Winnicott the influential Paediatrician and Psychoanalyst whose writing on child development still has much to teach us. Winnicott was clear that children do not develop in some solitary state but in relationships and principally in relationship with the primary care giver, most often their mother. This caregiver cannot perfectly

meet every need of the child at every point of each day, it is impossible and, more importantly, it would also be damaging; a point that many caring for children need reminding of.

Perfection is not possible because there is always a complex set of competing needs. So a child needs to be comforted but also has to learn how to manage her own feelings. She needs to know that someone will provide food when she is hungry but also that she can wait if it doesn't come immediately. She needs to know that she is able to depend on those who care for her but also to learn that they connect to other people and sometimes others needs come first. So Winnicott said a child needs a 'good enough' mother, one who gets it right often enough for the child to develop security and trust but one who allows the child space to grow to develop her independence to do things for herself. He said that a child had either a good enough or a not good enough mother.

Being good enough is not about following a formula, it is often a process of trial and error, of learning together, of co-operation and negotiation. It does not follow rules but requires the development of wisdom through the practice of doing the caring. Instead of rules this way of being with and for an-other requires virtues.

Now to talk of Virtues could be seen as introducing another form of perfection. How can I be good enough to be considered virtuous? But that is to misunderstand virtues which are about developing character, being good enough, finding balance and a way to make good choices in real situations.

When I say they are about balance I draw on the definition of virtues given by Aristotle who saw them as mathematical means; there is always a pull in either direction. The virtue is not some kind of mid-point in a kind of fence sitting way but finding the place between the excess or lack. So Courage is the balance between rashness and cowardice.

Sara Ruddick in her writing about Mothering as a practice uses the concept of virtues. She suggests that the way to develop virtues is to understand what she calls the temptation to the degenerate form, the non-life giving forms. So we find that many courageous people are those that have struggled with cowardice but they need to not tip over into a rashness that might compromise others.

Ruddick identifies a central virtue of humility which echoes with our Christian tradition and it is the virtue that speaks into the myth of perfect control.

Humility is an often misunderstood virtue. Because virtues have been traditionally defined as opposite to a vice rather than as a midpoint between excess and lack, humility has been understood as a form of self-abasement the polar opposite of pride. Yet, we know that although excessive pride is a dangerous thing; minorities, the oppressed and the overlooked sometimes need to find pride in who they are. It is a false humility either to have no sense of self-worth or to have power but pretend that somehow you don't. Genuine humility is about finding that place of balance where we can take responsibility for what is within our control and accept the reality of all that is not. We need to recognise the temptations in order to develop the virtue.

So we recognise the temptation that fantasises about perfect control, this can lead to over working, over intrusive care of others, patterns of domination however well meaning, where we try to make everything conform to our sense of order. It is often easier to recognise it in others rather than ourselves!

The temptation in the other direction is to a sense that what we do does not really matter or affect others so this leads to neglect, passivity, failure to take responsibility for ourselves and others and often a kind of fatalism or despair. The temptation is to fixate on the failures of others, of the system, of Life of God, with no real sense of what we can be doing with what is within our capacity to change.

Humility is akin to St Paul's advice in Romans 12 not to think too highly of ourselves but to have a sober judgement that recognises the gifts that we do have and then utilises them to build up community.

Ruddick says that alongside Humility, that proper sense of what is and is not in our control, should go the virtue of clear sighted resilient cheerfulness. Not being tempted into a cheery denial that pretends difficult stuff doesn't happen but not being tempted into a despair that saps hope.

Another philosophical writer from the 20th century Hannah Arendt speaks about the building up of community. She says that the one thing all human beings have in common is that each is unique. This means that in our interactions with each other, as we work together for the common good, we need to develop two important ways of being.

We need to be those who can 'make and keep promises' that is we need to be trustworthy, people of integrity this is within our control. Yet, she reminds us

this complex world full of unique individuals is unpredictable and we trespass on each other. We cannot and do not always know how not to do this so we also need the capacity to forgive and be forgiven which she tells us we can learn from Jesus Christ.

Again in a sophisticated philosophical treatise she seems to be offering us this model of being good enough. Striving to respond to the world and to the people we encounter in a way that has integrity and authenticity but knowing that in the complexity of it all we will not always get it right so we need to forgive and be forgiven and understanding that it is in the failures that need forgiving, as well as the things we get right, that wisdom is learnt and character built.

So as we try to live in our world with its myth of perfect control and its fears that we are just products of our genes, our situation in some kind of fatalistic despair. We need to explore what it means to be 'good enough' to develop a clear sighted assessment of who we are and what we can control, what we are responsible for, how God has gifted us and to do our best with all of this. Whilst at the same time recognising our temptations, and the ways in which we so easily give in to them and at times in doing so trespass on others.

Does my quickness of thought which is such a gift in some of the pastoral encounters in my ministry tempt me to interrupt and undermine my slower colleagues in a meeting? Does my extrovert nature so useful in many social situations tempt me to avoid the silent places where I should be listening to God? Jesus taught us to pray. Lead us not into temptation but forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. So we need to learn to recognise our temptations, learn from our failings and trust in the grace of God to work in us and through us that we may be good enough.

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