

“Like children sitting in the market place”: a teaching on Wisdom, vanity and desire

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Imagine yourselves, please, in a dusty market square in the Middle East. Children are playing. They are involved in a traditional game of “Weddings and Funerals”. In this game the boys lead the way in calling the group to take part in a mock-wedding, for, in their adult world, playing the music at weddings, and dancing, was principally the work of the menfolk. So the boys play on pipes and penny whistles to conjure up the ambience of the wedding, and the girls respond, also being drawn into the dance. After a bit the girls take over as the music shifts shape to become more mournful, and soon it is their shrill ululations, wailings and beating of heads and breasts in mock despair that powers the dance, and the boys for their part join in with mock weeping. The girls are imitating the adult womenfolk they will become, women whose role in leading rituals of mourning by extravagant gestures has become sadly familiar to us from endless pictures, televised from the Middle East, of funerals amidst human and architectural devastation. And back and forth the game will go.

As in all really good children’s games, the point is not to get anything done. The point is the game itself, the fun of swinging to and fro between the different “parties”, the shift from wedding type music and dancing to funereal music and wailing, and back again, the being involved in endless, apparently pointless repetition. For this endless, apparently pointless, repetition is in fact a form of learning and socializing. Through it, the boys and the girls will become the adult actors in the culture for which their childhood is rehearsal time. Thus do play and culture reinforce each other.

Now imagine this scenario gone wrong. For some reason, the game has broken down. For the game to work a certain reciprocity was needed, a certain give and take, so that each “party” allowed itself to be sucked into

the rhythm of the other. But that reciprocity has failed. The boys are sitting in the square, when they should be on their feet, making music, and they are shouting out to the girls “we piped to you, and you wouldn’t dance”. And the girls, also sitting, in another part of the square, are shouting back “we wailed, and you would not weep”. In other words, each group is refusing to take part in the bit of the game which was dependent on the other, and each group is blaming the other for having started it first. A certain sort of reciprocity has collapsed, the benign reciprocity of each agreeing to be pulled into the game of the other, so as to make the whole thing more fun in a constant back-and-forth. And instead what looks at first glance like a simple failure of reciprocity has started up: each group is paralysed by its inability to enter into the game of the other.

In fact, however, this does not lead to a simple failure of reciprocity. The groups have not fallen silent and collapsed into glum introspection. Each group is still as resolutely dependent on the other as before, but the game has turned from a dance game into what we would call “the blame game”. So each is calling out to the other: “It’s your fault, you started it by not joining in with us”; “No, it’s your fault, you started it by not joining in with *us*”, as though there could possibly be a beginning or an end in the game of weddings and funerals. This is the ultimate “chicken and egg situation”: if you stop to argue about which came first, then you are left with neither. The culture which you are rehearsing and learning how to repeat is one which has ground down into the futility of constant recrimination.

This children’s game, as you all know, is the image which Jesus used¹ in order to say something about his contemporaries and about how Wisdom was working in their midst. The context of that teaching is far richer than we are accustomed to hearing, so I’d like to fill it in for you, in the hopes that we can find how we fit into the narrative. This is one of those places in the New Testament where, if we scratch the surface of the text, we can get a glimpse of an extraordinary teacher giving a scriptural masterclass in the midst of a group of his contemporaries. A clue that this is what is going on is to be found in the verse which Jesus puts into the mouths of the opposing groups. One shouts:

We piped to you but you would not dance!

While the other group shouts back:

¹ Luke 7, 31-5; Mt 11, 16-19 I give the full text of the Lucan version as Appendix I.

We wailed, and you did not weep!

Now any listener with a sensitive ear to words could have picked up the allusion. And many of those in whose midst Jesus was teaching would have had long-honed recall of the sacred texts. Jesus is alluding to the text of the book of Ecclesiastes, one of whose best known sections is a list of things for which there is a proper time²:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; *a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.*

Jesus links the quote and the children's game to point out that something has got out of kilter. In the book of Ecclesiastes, part of the Wisdom of Solomon, to whom it was traditionally ascribed, you get an indication of how things should be, as set out by Wisdom. When Wisdom orchestrates, there is a time for dancing and a time for mourning: each has its proper place, and they flow into each other, like the children's game when it is working. But when vanity gets in the way, and vanity is described as like the wind, going round and round, going nowhere, you get the breakdown of the proper time for things, and people shouting at each other instead. So Jesus is pointing to something about how "this generation", his contemporaries, have got bogged down into vanity, going nowhere at all, with their culture breaking down into mutual recrimination. Yet, nevertheless, he says, Wisdom *is* at work, bringing all things to be in way that is artful, full of meaning and vitality, the very opposite of vanity, where everything goes round and round in ever more cantankerous circles, grinding down into paralysis.

It is not merely that Jesus asserts this about Wisdom; he shows himself fulfilling it by interpreting a situation which he himself had provoked, and it is here that we begin to see quite what an extraordinary teacher he must have been. He takes advantage of something which his audience has just seen, and must have been wondering about. In both Matthew and Luke (and it is the Lucan version which I am following), the passage about the children in the marketplace, with its Ecclesiastes reference to

² Eccl 3, 1-4 I give the full text of Ecclesiastes 2, 18 - 3, 4 as Appendix II.

the proper time for dancing and for mourning, is immediately preceded by an account of the visit of some disciples of John the Baptist.

John was in prison, but had not yet been executed. He had been toiling in the desert preaching a baptism of repentance, so as to prepare the way for one coming after him. This had been a popular religious phenomenon, leading to mass pilgrimages of multitudes of the “simple faithful”, including lots of people widely regarded as “bad”, to the Jordan. The religious professionals of the time had thoroughly disapproved of this: it was too extreme, too fundamentalist, too crude, and too indiscriminating, so not really from God. During his baptising John had even identified Jesus as the one for whom he had been preparing. Yet, now, in prison, and facing an uncertain future, which would in fact be his execution, John wondered whether he’d really been right to point to Jesus as the one who was to come. So he sent some of his disciples to ask whether Jesus really was the one for whom he’d been preparing, or whether they should be waiting for someone else.

Jesus replies to these visitors by pointing out the signs which he had just been performing, and of which there was ample evidence and talk all around him: people cured from diseases, from being bound by evil spirits, sight being given to the blind and so on. And then he tells John’s messengers to consider what they have seen and heard; but he does so, again, by allusion to a series of passages from Isaiah (Is 29, 18-19; 35, 5-6; 61,1) which tell of the coming of the Lord and what will happen on the day that He comes: the blind will see, the lame will be made whole and so on. Please notice that this “Coming of the Lord” is not prophesying the arrival of a miracle worker, it is announcing the arrival of the Creator who is fulfilling creation, turning bits of “futile” or “vain” creation into creation made fully alive and rejoicing. So Jesus answers John’s question by saying “I’m not going to answer you directly, for what you were preparing for is arriving as something on an entirely different level from what you expected, and you can infer what that is from what your messengers report to you of what they see: signs of the Creator in the midst of his people, fulfilling Creation”.

It is then that Jesus turns to his audience and asks them how they thought of John. His audience was composed of two different sorts of people: the kind who had gone out to take part in John’s Baptism, people who had been happy to take part in what would have been something like a popular mourning party, as crowds poured out for a penitential pilgrimage; and, on the other hand the religious professional kind who had not gone, thinking all such vulgarity beneath them. What Jesus then

does is quite masterly: he plunges his listeners into a ventriloquised performance of a central chunk of the book of Ecclesiastes. He has just been approached by the messengers from John, and what John had effectively been asking was “Have I been in vain? Has my ministry been worthless?” And Jesus has assured him that far from it, the very reverse of vanity, Wisdom making creation alive and filled out, is now at work.

Jesus then turns to the audience and, by allusion, puts into John’s mouth, the following passage from Ecclesiastes (Eccles 2, 18-26):

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that *I must leave it to the man who will come after me*; and who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a man who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by a man who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and strain with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of pain, and his work is a vexation; even in the night his mind does not rest. This also is vanity. There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; for apart from him (*Hebrew*: me) who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the man who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

This is the passage immediately leading into the Ecclesiastes passage which I quoted to you above, about there being a time for mourning and a time for dancing!

Do you see what Jesus is doing then, when he asks the crowd: “Who did you go out to see”? “Did you go out to see a reed blowing in the wind – as though John really were a symbol of the vanity of the wind blowing? Or did you go out to see the flip side of that vanity: the vanity of the soft-clothed courtier to whom everything appears to have been given, the one who can “eat and have his enjoyment”? In other words: was this trip out to the Jordan simply a mimetic function of crowd desire, which one moment fixates on an ascetic celebrity, so as, moments later, to fixate on

a luxurious celebrity? Or was there something more than this there? And then Jesus answers for them: yes, there was more to it than just crowd desire. John really was a prophet. There was in his message and his ministry something which really was from God. He was in fact fulfilling the prophecy of Malachi of the messenger, or angel, who was to come before God himself came. John's ministry was not a function of vanity, for Wisdom, which is to say, the ordered pattern and bringing into being of creation, really was at work in preparing people by penitence, even though what was coming, the Wedding Feast, was going to be so different in kind, not merely in degree, that great though John was, what is coming about now is of an entirely different order.

Well, as you can imagine, hearing this, there was an outbreak of partisan spirit among the listeners: Jesus was apparently justifying those who had gone out to John, those who had been easily moved. He was saying: "Yes, there really was something there, this was not simply vanity". And of course, this enabled, as it always does, those people to crow victoriously over the up-tight. The up-tight took themselves more seriously than to allow themselves to be swept up in such things. They looked down on the easily moved. The up-tight had more serious things to be about: it was their job after all to preserve the Bride spotless for the wedding, to prepare the wedding feast when the Lord would come and marry Israel, to be the friends of the bridegroom. And of course, if your job is to keep the Bride spotless, you need to purify her constantly by getting rid of sinners and other diluters of holiness from the midst of you. So you engage in constantly fencing around desire, to make quite sure that you are sinless. And you can clearly see that the sort of people who are easily moved are just the sort of people who are easily run by desire, carried hither and thither by every wind of fashion. These are just the sort of people who get in the way of the Lord coming to his marriage feast, so we must discount them. If they go off after something, you can pretty much guarantee that it's not the sort of thing which the friends of the Bridegroom ought to be about: so we can easily discount the baptism of John as not having been from God.

Now the really interesting thing here is that Jesus, contrary to what we might think of this story at first blush, doesn't simply side with the "easily-moved" over against the "up-tight". He does something far more subtle. He notes the reactions of both groups to his insistence that John was a prophet, and what he sees is the "easily-moveds" celebrating and rejoicing in the discomfort of the "up-tights" who are pooh-poohing the whole notion. And then he stands back from both groups and says "You know, you're really as bad as each other. You up-tights, you would-be

friends of the bridegroom, have been trying to get everyone to dance to your tune, trying to make the whole culture into a preparation for the Wedding entirely on your terms, and completely despising those who don't dance to your tune, making it more and more difficult for them to be part of the wedding. You regard them as easily-moveds, so that when they started wailing with a funeral-type dance, following John the Baptist, you wouldn't take part in their dance, by going along and weeping with them. By being up-tight you make it more difficult for yourselves to be moved, for sure, but that makes it far more difficult for you to be moved towards what is good, as well as towards what is bad.

“And you easily-moveds, you found it easy to be swept up in the dance of repentance which went along with John, but you don't seem to be aware that there is no point to that repentance dance if it doesn't lead into the Wedding dance. Will you be able to follow me as I lead you into the Wedding dance? At least the up-tights have it right about it being fundamentally a wedding dance, even if their childish rehearsal for a wedding falls as spectacularly short of the real thing as your childish rehearsal for mourning falls short of the real breaking and remaking of hearts which is to come with the Holy Spirit. You refuse to join in their dance, just as much as they refuse to join in yours.”

But what is key here, and it is a feature of Jesus teaching in all the Gospels, is that being an “up-tight” is no different from being an “easily-moved” in terms of desire: both are equal and opposite pathologies of desire which play into each other. The up-tights need the easily-moveds so as to compare themselves with them and feel good about themselves by contrast. And the easily-moveds need the up-tights because the up-tights are so obviously inhuman and screwed up in comparison to “us good, plain common folk, none of your lah-di-dah airs and graces”. Each stakes out his own petty “goodness” over against the other, and neither enters into real goodness which requires no comparison against the other, but a common being sucked into a common game, building each other up in readiness for the real Wedding. A society and a culture is functioning well when its masters of the “good” as well as its masters of “getting on with things, making mistakes and getting up again” are sufficiently in harmony with each other that there is an easy flow between the two elements. But it has broken down when the two elements are made into each other's enemies, grinding each other down into futility.

Now of course, it is true, as Jesus points out in other passages, that it is much easier for the “easily-moveds” to make it into the Kingdom than it is for the “up-tights”, and he warns the religious leaders that prostitutes

and tax-collectors are making their way in easily, while the “righteous” stand scandalized outside. But, and this is important: this is not a populist point of the sort “the people, ‘*el pueblo unido*’ are the good guys vs the religious leaders who are the bad guys”. Jesus is not a populist teacher, and crowds and their patterns of desire are not good things in the Gospels! Jesus is observing something much more straightforwardly anthropological: of the two equal and opposite pathologies of desire, being easily moved has the advantage that it is easier to get out of. If you are the sort of person who is easily moved, it has the disadvantage that it makes it awfully difficult for you to be consistently and constantly involved in a project over time, and much easier for you to be swept up in a fashion, or for a little slip-up to progress rapidly into a major vice. But it has the advantage that it is much less hard for you to be able to recognise that you’ve screwed up and to respond to help when it is offered.

Whereas, if you are one of the up-tights, you will be unaware of how much your own needs and desires, including your reactions to the crowd, are enmeshed in your long-term making of yourself good. And because you are less likely to have a major slip-up, you are also more likely to avoid the humiliation which goes along with being confronted by your pathology, and you are much less likely to appreciate such help as you are offered. In other words, it will be much more difficult for you to be stripped down and refitted for entry into the Kingdom. And we all know this: Alcoholics Anonymous groups abound, so too do Narcotics Anonymous, and Sexaholics anonymous. But I’m not sure that I know of any support group for addicts to righteousness, for those who have become enmeshed in and paralysed by their own highly dangerous pursuit of goodness. Unless, of course, we remember that the Catholic Church, when it is faithful to what it is about, is largely God’s own attempt to set up a worldwide association of “Fundamentalists Anonymous”.

To finish his teaching, Jesus does indeed then turn specifically to the up-tights, to the Pharisees and Lawyers, who are of course the members of his audience who will best have understood what use he is making of Ecclesiastes. He points out to them their own stuckness of desire, their own paralysis and inability to enter the Kingdom. They look at John the Baptist, and they see an extreme ascetic, and they say to themselves: “Oh, that’s much too much – religious desire wound up to a crazy, or even a demonic, pitch, we should have nothing to do with this”. And then they look at Jesus, who has none of these ascetic practices, and is perfectly happy to keep thoroughly impure company, and they say to themselves: “Oh, that’s far too little, that’s religious desire which is far too relaxed and unconcerned about purity and holiness, we should have nothing to do

with that”. So they are in a perfect double bind, unable to move this way or that, but unaware that in this double-bind, they are as much moved by desire as the crowds they despise, just moved into constantly painful stuckness.

Jesus’ final salvo goes back to the Ecclesiastes text which he has consistently been illustrating throughout. In Ecclesiastes 2, 18-20, which Jesus puts into John’s mouth, the speaker effectively says: “Here I have been toiling away in impossible circumstances, and all that I have done will be left to another. Has it all been in vain?” Jesus has already answered this question: “No, it was not vain. You were not vain in your ministry. You worked with Wisdom and Knowledge.” Now the very next verses of Ecclesiastes, 2, 20-22 imagines John putting a second question: “OK, Let us suppose that I *am* a man of wisdom and knowledge, even so, might I not have left everything to be enjoyed by someone who didn’t toil for it, and wouldn’t that also be vanity and great evil? In other words: wisdom might be justified in my work, but not in the work of the one who comes after me. What do you say to that?”

Well, what Jesus says to that is: “I’m doing what it says in Ecclesiastes 2, 24-25, where it says “There’s nothing better for people than that they should eat and drink and find enjoyment, and far from it being a matter of my being a drunkard and a glutton, these things are from the hand of God. In fact, apart from *me* (and you can imagine the frisson in his listeners as they realised what he was implying), how could they eat or have enjoyment? For God gives wisdom and joy and knowledge to whom he pleases, eating and sharing enjoyment with them. So, not only was John a child of Wisdom, but so am I, and so are those to whom I give Wisdom by sharing in their meals – Wisdom is justified by all her children, and doesn’t that leave those of you who think of me as a glutton and a drunkard in the position of sinners who are gathering and heaping in vain, while God gives his riches somewhere else?”.

Luke’s Gospel doesn’t give an account of the reaction of the Pharisees and Lawyers to Jesus teaching here. But I hope I have given you enough of a glimpse of what that teaching style might have been like to see that they would have been simultaneously amazed at the freedom and authority with which he interpreted Scripture; admiring and, I should imagine, not a little jealous of the way he was able to bring together both events as they unfolded around him, and the perfect set of scriptural texts from which to make sense of those events. They would of course, have been left challenged and discomfited by the open ended questions he was leaving as to where they themselves fit into the Scripture – not

necessarily where they would have liked to be. But some of them, I suspect, would have been left with a more speculative curiosity. For Jesus wasn't merely being playful, though he was that, and you can almost hear the rabbinic playfulness beneath his handling of these texts, or you would be able to if I knew how to handle them less clunkily.

Jesus was suggesting in a quite coherent fashion something about the relationship between God, creation, desire, and the present time. Let me have a go at trying to bring this out, because it illustrates something which is both fundamental to our Faith, and yet something about which we are little accustomed to think.

The great Jewish breakthrough concerning monotheism is something to which we Catholics give far too little attention. And yet, without it, nothing in our texts make sense. The Jewish breakthrough into monotheism was not simply a matter of having worked out that all the other gods were either silly, or better considered as different faces of the same god, so that it was more hygienic, and more grown-up to have one god. It was not a speculative matter at all. If it were a speculative matter, the ancient Hebrews would have found themselves worshipping one god, with a small g, that is to say, a projection of their group unity and togetherness. This god would have been a function of their pattern of desire, and their worship of this god would have in fact been an imprisonment in a form of totalitarianism. A form of totalitarianism in which they would have enclosed themselves, thinking themselves superior to others, attributing their imprisonment to the limits of created order as set out by their one god. Their worship of their one god would have been what kept the order of creation going and would have given them goodness, and of course, enabled them to identify who the bad guys are.

However, this was not what happened at the great Jewish breakthrough into monotheism. Indeed, something almost exactly the reverse of this happened. The Ancient Hebrews made the discovery, or underwent the revelation, which are two ways of referring to the same thing, that far from god being a projection of theirs, trapped into being part of the order of everything that is, as a guarantor of order and prop to their group goodness, they and everything that is were projections of God, who is not part of anything that is. This is not, as it were *an addition* to, or *a perfection* of, religious understandings of God available in other cultures, but it is a complete turning inside out of any religious understanding available in any culture, and once made, it cannot be gone back on.

Let me give you a somewhat crass image to help make sense of this turning-inside out. I'd like you to imagine a brown paper bag from a bakery. Now imagine that this bag is upside down, so that the open bit is at the bottom, and the closed bit is at the top. Let us imagine that since this is a pretty classy bakery, there are all sorts of quality crumbs, of an energetic nature, and these crumbs are clustering inside the closed top of the bag, pushing and shoving the edge of the bag, trying to stretch its limits, trying to see out through the bag, which they can a little, since a brown paper bag *is* slightly see-through, and yet lends a mistakenly sepia tint to everything you see through it. Well, of course, the more the crumbs push and pull, all they do is push and pull the bag more firmly around them, and everything they see is in fact a function of the bag and its being pushed and pulled around by them.

Now imagine something which they can't see properly, but which starts to happen, a giant fist comes out of nowhere and slowly and gradually pushes in the top of the bag, against which all the crumbs are pushing upwards. This fist which seems at first to be an enemy, pushes on and on – it is much stronger than the crumbs, and in fact it pushes the bag right through, with the crumbs still pushing against it, and gradually, and without the crumbs noticing it, what used to be the inside of the bag has become the outside of the bag, and the fist has become hidden inside the bag. The fist turns and starts to raise itself up, with the crumbs still pushing against the crease. But they are now pushing downwards, and they are in fact on the top of and outside the bag, which is being gently held aloft by the fist within. Gradually a few of the crumbs stop trying to push down and turn round and look around about them.

For the first time ever they have no sacred canopy, no protective cover, nothing at all hemming them in, no sepia-tinted vision. And they can look outwards towards nothing, and then down at the paper bag and for the first time, look at it as if from outside anything that is. Which means that they can see themselves, as well, as part of everything that is, but with the extraordinary relativity which is made possible by being able to see that it is all contingent, not sacred, not part of any push and pull of their own. The moving fist, which they cannot see, is not part of anything that is, but what the fist has done is enabled them to see everything that is as open-ended, and not tied to a sacred order made in their own image.

When we talk about God as Creator, and as Creation, it is this huge turning inside out of worlds that is being talked about: the difference between “us being trapped in an order of our own creation which is a function of our own projections” and our discovering to our amazement

that there is an unmentionably huge power behind everything that is, that we and everything that is are contingent to and projections of that power. With this there comes the extraordinary freedom of the realisation that there is an “outside” to everything that is, so that everything that is is contingent, and that means not tied down into sacrality, divine power struggles and so on. And of course, apparently “religious” people of every generation will try to reject the Creator and Creation, preferring instead a god who maintains a sacred order according to a set textbook. And the reason why is not hard to see: if you are outside the bag, and looking outwards, and the fist is hidden beneath you, as it were, in the bag, what you will see is: nothing, nothing all around. You will be considered an atheist by all, because nothing you see or can imagine is God. And everything that is will be open to exploration.

Well, so much would have been absolutely common ground between Jesus and the Pharisees and lawyers with whom he was talking. Any self-respecting Rabbi knows this: that when we say God is not one of the gods, we are saying that God is much more like nothing at all than like anything that is, because it is only by God not being anything that is, that everything that is can be a function of God. It is, however, not easy to keep this endlessly open-ended glimpse alive. And after you have got over the initial excitement of the great reversal, the perception that everything that is rests on God’s constantly bringing it into and holding it in, being, a further, perfectly reasonable question asserts itself. This is the question of vanity.

After all, there you are, standing on the outside of the bag, you’ve undergone the great reversal, you are able to look about at everything that is, and you know that this is all from God. So there is all this open-endedness which you can’t go back from. And yet, so what? Doesn’t everything seem to be constantly grinding down anyhow. What is the point of it all? It doesn’t lead anywhere does it? There may be a fist in the bag, but since everything moves altogether, I can’t detect whether it’s going anywhere. I have no sense that any of the power of the fist is able to reach through the bag and inspire me to look out with shining eyes. This is the regard of vanity: the eyes that could be making the extraordinary glimpse are seeing all that is as somehow not sharing in the the vivacity and endless creativeness that is God. And it is a pattern of desire which forms those eyes. A pattern of desire which goes round and round getting nowhere. When St Paul talked about “creation being subjected to futility” this is what he was talking about: we can look at everything that is, and yet it not be bright for us, it not reflect a glory not its own, or yield a loving intention. What *is* is not shot through for us

with a creative desire which we can sense, a being pulled beyond itself into something more. It just is, and our hearts curve down with the sense of an arrow falling short of its mark, a disappointment at things somehow not being what they might.

The opposite of Vanity in the Hebrew tradition was Wisdom. And Wisdom was what brightened the eyes, enabling the one making the glimpse to see that there was a point to it all, there was a “this is going somewhere”, “this is meant for something”, “God does not make things in vain”, “all this undetermined open-endedness is good and for something good, and good for you”. Now the genius of a book like Ecclesiastes is how it sits on the open edge of what is and looks out in a way which can be read as tending down towards vanity, or can be read as tending up towards Wisdom.

But here is the point: if there really was to be wisdom, then it must come from somewhere, and it must be the same somewhere as God, it must be part of the fist breaking through the paper bag into our own eyesight, or else it too is simply a part of everything that is, and can't therefore be a criteria *by which* we can know that what is is *for* something. And if wisdom comes from the same somewhere as God, and is to do with the holy desire by which everything that is is held opening out into ever greater vivacity, then it too must be something living, eternal, and contemporary, because creation is always an eternal “now”. And from the point of view of us humans, such a holy, living, eternal desire, intelligence, or dynamic, forming creation constantly from within can't only be something that is “just out there”, about which we know, but must be something that is coming, coming towards us, sensed as on its way. A Wisdom which was “just out there”, and didn't have any “coming towards us” would be just as much subject to vanity as everything else. For it would not be enabling us to break out of the vanity of our downward-curved regard.

Now this is where Jesus' discussion with his contemporaries gets really interesting. The notion of Wisdom as personal, almost a divine persona, when not actually a goddess, since feminine, who accompanied creation: this was part of the old priestly tradition of the First Temple. The religious leaders of the second Temple period, the ones who gave us the Pentateuch, and their disciples, had rejected huge elements of that wisdom tradition. Creation has happened, and thereafter what we have is Torah. No visions, no incarnations, no emanations from God, angels are deeply suspicious. Just Torah. So you should not look into mysteries, but merely study the Law of the Lord. That will give you all the wisdom you

need. There is no need for prophecy to be fulfilled, for a divine spirit to be given, or for the will of the Lord to be made manifest in certain ways in history.

It is this that Jesus is challenging: he is not only teaching, but performing, Wisdom coming into the world in and through a specific historical acting out which is happening now. “These miracles are not simply the products of a wonder-worker. This is what happens when the Creator is in the midst of his people making creation alive, bursting with potential. This habit of mine of eating with sinners is not simply another example of eating well since there’s nothing better to do, which would be a good example of “what is” curving down towards vanity. By eating with sinners in this way I am actually making of those meals a sign of the Wedding feast that is coming, since that is what Wisdom is preparing: there is a point to everything, it is good, and it will end in rejoicing. But please, if you reject the One who is coming in, you are in fact left with One whose will for you, and intention for you, you can’t really know, and you will remain stuck in vanity. If you are too hygienic in your understanding of God, you will be left with a Creation which you will try to close down as being too much for you, and you will somehow be disappointed in it, whereas if you understand that the fist is, even as we speak breaking through the paper bag, that I am in fact a finger of the appearing fist, and that all these crumbs can themselves become fingers, able to become alive from within the meaning of what is and take part in making it something new and fresh, then, and only then will you really be worshipping the Creator. Only then will you be a living part of the wild ride adventure of what is, from within.”

Well, I don’t want to go on too long from here. I just wanted to illustrate how an ancient Jewish discussion about the Creator and a discussion of us being reached by a new pattern of desire starting from where we are is in fact the same discussion. Just as the Jewish discovery of Creation meant an ability to glimpse the contingency of everything that is, so Jesus’ resurrection meant an ability to see the contingency, the non-necessity, the non-sacrality, even of death, thus setting us free to live as if death were not. And the giving of the Holy Spirit enables us to see the contingency and the non-sacrality of all human desire. Not something to be run away from, or protected against, but something which the Creator can curve upwards, away from vanity, towards upbuilding, and indeed towards a fruition and a joy, starting in the permanent now, which is where we are.

Some of you, I'm sure, will have noticed that not at all unlike the people gathered to hear Jesus in the passage I read to you, we too know of, or we may be, "friends of the bridegroom" whose desire to keep the bride pure causes them to engage in constant restriction of access to marriage. And we also know of, or we may be, those who, having been constantly told that they cannot marry, have given way to vain desire and all its sadness. We are probably, in fact, people who flit between being uptights and flibbertigibbets. I hope that, perhaps, this evening, we will have been able to hear, breathing through the pages of our Scriptures, the voice of the Bridegroom, laughing tenderly at our waywardness and summoning us, coaxing us, encouraging us, to come to the Wedding.

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Appendix I

Luke 7, 18b-35 (NRSV)

So John summoned two of his disciples

19 and sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 20 When the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'" 21 Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. 22 And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. 23 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." 24 When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 25 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. 26 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 28 I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." 29 (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. 30 But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.) 31 "To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? 32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.' 33 For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; 34 the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' 35 Nevertheless, Wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

Appendix II

Ecclesiastes (Qohelet) 2, 18- 3,4 (NRSV)

I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me 19 – and who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. 20 So I turned

and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labors under the sun, 21 because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. 22 What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? 23 For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity. 24 There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; 25 for apart from him (Hebrew has “apart from me”) who can eat or who can have enjoyment? 26 For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

3:1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: 2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; 4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.