

CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

GOD'S COMPANIONS

Reimagining Christian Ethics



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Perhaps most distinctively, this is a study that locates the heart of ethics squarely in the practices of the local church. Through all the descriptions of practices and claims that these constitute God's gifts to the Church for shaping its life, I throughout offer examples that demonstrate the way ordinary Christians have had their characters shaped by these remarkable gifts. These stories are more than illustrations, for in many cases they take the argument forward in ways that could not be perceived except in narrative form. On occasion I have drawn on stories from beyond the local church when that seemed more appropriate. But these cases are rare exceptions, and for each one there is a fairly evident reason. In general, the doggedness of the stories seeks to celebrate the earthiness of the Church. Sometimes I have changed details of characters or events in order to preserve the anonymity of the protagonists. But all the stories derive from actual events. It is not just that throughout the writing of this book I was a parish priest, striving to practice what I am here preaching. It is that I believe the people whose stories are told in this book are truly God's companions, the heart of Christian ethics and the embodiment of the Gospel, and the best form ethics can take is a celebration of what God does through the practices they perform and the people God thus makes them.

Everything They Need

This book displays that ethics is about the action of God embodied in the practices of the Church. But perhaps its most controversial claim is that this action constitutes everything his people need to follow him. Everything they *need* does not mean everything they *want*. And everything they need to *follow* him does not mean everything they need to live a long, healthy life free from suffering, disappointment, frustration, or loneliness and full of achievement, recognition, and contentment. These things may be substituted for the Gospel, may be the aspirations of many Christians, may be welcome blessings in any human life – but they are not to be mistaken for following the God of Jesus Christ. Christians are called to follow and are given everything they need to follow. Following Jesus is living with the grain of the universe. Christian ethics commends those things that run with the grain of the universe, and amplifies those practices that enrich and enable that life; explicitly or implicitly it critiques those things that run against the grain. Following Jesus means learning to want the limitless things God gives us in Jesus.

Throughout the argument I am consciously alternating between two related notions: sufficiency and abundance. On the one hand I argue that

God gives enough: on the other, I suggest that God gives too much. To suggest that God gives enough is a criticism of what I take to be a consistent majority strand in Christian ethics – the assumption that there is not enough, and thus that ethics is the very difficult enterprise of making bricks from straw. Scarcity assumes there is not enough information – we know too little about the human body, about the climate, about what makes wars happen, about how to bring people out of poverty, about what guides the economy. There is not enough wisdom – there are not enough forums for the exchange of understanding, for learning from the past, for bringing people from different disciplines together, and there is not enough intelligence to solve abiding problems. There are not enough resources – world population is growing, and there is insufficient access to education, clean water, food, health care, and the means of political influence. There is not enough revelation – the Bible is a lugubrious and often ambiguous document, locked into its time, unable to address the problems of today with the clarity required. Fundamentally, I suggest, this whole assumption of scarcity rests on there being not enough God. Somehow God, in creation, Israel, Jesus and the Church, and in the promise of the eschaton, has still not done enough, given enough, been enough, such that the imagined ends of Christian ethics are and will always be tantalizingly out of reach.

In contrast to this assumption of scarcity I suggest that God gives enough – everything that his people need. He gives them everything they need in the past: this is heritage; and everything they could possibly imagine in the future; this is destiny. He gives them the Holy Spirit, making past and future present in the life of the Church. He gives them a host of practices – ways in which to form Christians, embody them in Christ, receive all that God, one another, and the world have to give them, be reconciled and restored when things go wrong, and share food as their defining political, economic, and social act. The things he gives are not in short supply: love, joy, peace. The way these gifts are embodied is through the practices of the Church: witness, catechesis, baptism, prayer, friendship, hospitality, admonition, penance, confession, praise, reading scripture, preaching, sharing peace, sharing food, washing feet. These are boundless gifts of God. My complaint with conventional Christian ethics is that it overlooks, ignores, or neglects those things God gives in plenty, and concentrates on those things that are in short supply. In the absence of those things that are plentiful, it experiences life in terms of scarcity. My argument draws attention to those things that God gives his people and resists the temptation to scratch around for more.

On the other hand I argue that God gives his people not just enough, but too much. What I am doing is trying to account for there being more than one kind of problem in ethics. The first kind of problem is simply not

wanting, or wilfully disregarding, the gifts of God, and setting about making one's own. But there is another kind of problem, which is primarily about imagination. The "problem" is that there is too much of God. Whereas the first kind sees the difficulty being that God gives the wrong gifts, or not enough gifts, for the second kind the difficulty is that the human imagination is simply not large enough to take in all that God is and has to give. We are overwhelmed. God's inexhaustible creation, limitless grace, relentless mercy, enduring purpose, fathomless love: it is just too much to contemplate, assimilate, understand. This is the language of abundance. And if humans turn away it is sometimes out of a misguided but understandable sense of self-protection, a preservation of identity in the face of a tidal wave of glory. Christian ethics should seek to ride the crest of that wave. It should be a discipline not of earnest striving, but of joy; a study not of the edges of God's ways but of exploring the heart of grace. The practices that I outline in this book are patterns of activity through which God makes his overwhelming mercy a daily digestible discipline. They are ways of embodying his grace so that people of all social locations, all abilities, all ages can be transformed without being drowned.

These two claims, sufficiency and abundance, attract a recurring anxiety. "But surely the world is full of scarcity! Is it not foolhardy, wilfully blind or immoral to talk of sufficiency, let alone abundance?" I would offer two responses to this. One is from personal experience. For several years I was vicar of a church on a socially deprived housing estate in the East of England. For my own reasons I felt quite at home in a context of economic, cultural, social, and emotional deprivation. And then suddenly the estate found itself being offered a vast sum of government money to catalyze the formation of a community-led regeneration process. I found myself in a very influential position in this process for an extended period. What I learned was that poverty is not primarily about money. It is about having no idea what to do and/or having no one with whom to do it. The former I called imagination, the latter I called community. To the extent that our neighborhood had imagination and community, we were not poor. But without imagination and community, no money could help us. I perceived that the role of the local church was to be a *community of imagination*: and what enriched that community and embodied that community were the practices I describe in this book. Living in that deprived community, I discovered the abundance of God.

A second answer would be more analytical. It would ask in return, "What is it that makes starvation wrong? What is it that makes Africa, in the words of Tony Blair, 'a scar on the conscience of the world'?" What makes starvation wrong is not just human suffering and the degree to which it is

brought about by the greed and conflict of others. It is that it is a grotesque affront to God's character and purpose, which is for people to flourish in abundant life in companionship with him. Hence abundance is the grain of the universe, and starvation is a symptom of things being badly against the grain. The truth is that the world is not short of food, and the solution to starvation is not making more food (overcoming scarcity); the solution is sharing the food the world already has and reconciling the divisions that lead to ruinous conflict. These are exactly the concerns of the practices I describe as the gifts of God's abundance.

Thus there is no equivalence between God's abundance and human wealth or happiness. This is not a "be happy" or "realize how lucky you are" proclamation. On the contrary, it is a witness that God's gifts are etched most starkly in the face of human poverty and often recognized most distinctly in the face of human suffering. What is the accumulation of wealth but an insulation against dependence on the gifts of God? Is the accumulation of wealth not therefore a proclamation of God's scarcity? What is the absence of wealth but a dependence on the gifts of God – friendship, hospitality, the sharing of food? Is the voluntary absence of wealth not therefore a proclamation of the sufficiency of the gifts God gives in the practices of the Church? This surely is the reason monastic communities have such a treasured place in the Christian story – for they have traditionally been removed from conventional resources of insulation and have depended on the practices of the Church, which have thus been refined in their company. The Rule of St Benedict, for example, emphasizes having enough for one's needs, welcoming guests as though they were Christ, not driving people to undue lengths in manual labor, and praying concisely unless definitely led on by the Spirit (Benedict 1970).

To Worship Him

If God gives his people everything they need to follow him, what does following him entail? I suggest that to follow him means to be God's companions – hence the title of the book. Resolving companionship into three dimensions, it means to worship him, to be his friends, and to eat with him.

The book is divided into three parts, each of which is called "The Body of Christ." This phrase is used in three senses in the New Testament and in the life of the Church. It sometimes means Jesus, the embodied, anointed one, the good news of God yesterday, today, and forever. It sometimes means the Church, with its many limbs and organs, united to Christ in Baptism.