

W H Vanstone : The Stature of Waiting

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Beautifully written. We live in a world which values activity and action over passivity and passion. It has been thus since the creeping influence of Greek philosophy on the early Church. But it was not always so, and not so for Jesus. The gospels show a marked change from activity to passivity, action to passion, at the point where Jesus was 'handed over' – a phrase in common Christian currency in the first century. We have lost this; but perhaps we should recover it, and in recovering it find our human dignity enhanced, our powerlessness removed – for so we can be like God himself, attaining the dignity which is ours because we share in his being, and reconnecting with some of the values we overlook in our emphasis on doing over being. Sometimes he overstates his case, or it seems a bit single focus; but his points are all well made, valid and challenging.

1. The deed of Judas

We have grown to see Judas as the greatest traitor of all time, as the one who handed Jesus over to the soldiers, who bears responsibility for his death. But perhaps it was not intended to be read this way by those who first wrote it down:

- ✚ it was not, in terms of its effects, decisive; it wasn't necessary, and Jesus would have found the same things happening to him – he was making no secret of his whereabouts
- ✚ closer examination of the text reveals a meaning which is more complex than simple treachery would allow. The word 'betrayed' is used only once in 33 mentions of what Judas did; the other 32 times the phrase 'handed over' is used. Where that phrase is used in other contexts of the NT it has no connotation of betrayal – eg the talents are 'handed over', Jesus 'handed over' his spirit as he died, Paul 'hands over' the gospel by preaching it to the Corinthians. The gospel writers use it consistently and automatically; it must have been the stock phrase, perhaps the one Jesus himself used at the Last Supper.

Vanstone suggests the phrase 'handed over' was the one widely used in Christian circles to express the meaning of Jesus and the benefit he had brought to believers. Paul uses it – God 'handed his son over for us all'; Jesus 'loved me and handed himself over for me'. Not surprising that it is used at the Last Supper, the institution of the Eucharist. And so it isn't about Judas at all.

2. The Handing over of Jesus

In Mark's gospel, the narrative has a vigorous momentum. It is full of verbs, events, changes wrought by Jesus in the environment around him. Most of the verbs have Jesus as their subject even when others are the protagonists – eg he wondered at their unbelief, he knew that power had gone out of him; he found the disciples sleeping. But from the moment when Jesus is handed over, in the garden, it all changes. Mark now reports every incident through Jesus' eyes and attributes nothing that happens to his activity or initiative. It is all now about what was done to him, not what he did. Mostly he doesn't speak, only responds; and mostly his words are irrelevant to the actual events. Jesus is still the focus of the story, but he is not the subject but the object of activity. Jesus is no longer the one who does, but the one who is done to. And even his inner state becomes silent.

The same thing happens in John's gospel, but in a different way; the transition from activity to passivity is made by moving from an emphasis on the works of Jesus (in the light) to what is done to him (in the dark). At the Last Supper he says his work is finished. And daylight becomes night, and stays so. The activity of the day yields to the passivity of the night, and working becomes waiting.

So both Mark and John identify the handing over of Jesus with his transition from action to passion.

And it is important to understand what passion is – it means, being passive. The emphasis is not primarily on suffering; in C17th the word suffer many things just meant to have many things happen to you. It's on being the subject not the object; being a patient.

3. The status of a patient

A patient becomes passive and enters into passion; sometimes suddenly, eg after road accident. But the transition which is being made suddenly by the victim of an accident or thrombosis is being made gradually and imperceptibly by Western man in general – the status of patient is becoming ever more widespread and familiar in our world. Life for many is dependent on the provision of external support/attention – pension, benefit. Then these people have to 'fit in with' the more important activities of others. Even work is, for many, no more than to be a cog in the wheel. Entertainment/curiosity is to sit in front of the telly. Travel depends not on initiative but things like the state of the traffic and the availability of the RAC. We don't really travel any more; we are transported. In ever increasing areas of life we are exposed to factors beyond our power to control; eg the electricity supply. And yet the areas of life we value are those where we are free from dependence and exercising our own initiative. We compliment the old on keeping active. We enable the disabled. Retired people feel the need to explain how busy they are. Unemployed people are looked down on. Frustration is everywhere, because we have to wait on external systems/experts/decisions. In it all, we believe that if a person is the object rather than subject of what is happening in the world, he becomes diminished in stature.

4. The roots of impatience

Roman to Victorian times – not to have to work, to be active, was better. It is no more natural to admire someone for activity and self-sufficiency than to admire them for inherited distinction and the receipt of service. But sometimes everything hangs even now on a person who is not active – a person who is the focal point in a community where agencies have failed to bring a sense of neighbourliness; a handicapped child in a family. Action isn't even peculiar to man. So why do we identify the proper function of man with the exercise of his capacity for action? Perhaps because the W world owes its existence to the exploitation of man's capacity for production. Everything is about economics (although we are becoming consumers rather than producers now); and economics comes from work. But the so-called Protestant work ethic must go back further than that; it must be implicit in the religious inheritance of medieval Europe.

Vanstone traces it back to 2 places:

- ✚ the Christian teaching that man is made in the image of God
- ✚ the belief that God is *actus purus*, pure activity – never object, never passive

We believe that man, like God, has true dignity when active, proactive, creating, achieving, initiating; and that the role of patient, recipient, dependent makes him fall below his proper stature and dignity. But more and more in our society that is exactly what we find ourselves doing.

5. The road to Gethsemane

It is helpful to those suffering to remember Jesus suffered. But it is also the case that suffering is a misfortune to be avoided, and this is thought to apply to Jesus too. Is there any way of looking at it more positively? When the centurion said, truly this is the Son of God, he can't have meant he saw this in anything Jesus said or did. He saw only Jesus being 'done to'; and in this he saw his divinity. Until Jesus was 'handed over', it is his work that was the key thing. Afterwards, it was his glory. It remained to him not to work but to glorify God on earth. And the divine glory becomes powerfully evident in him at one moment: in the garden when the soldiers ask is he Jesus of Nazareth, and he replies, I am – the sacred name of God, the name disclosed to Moses. So his passion was not just the preliminary to his death, but the greatest phase of his life. The passion was not just the necessary prelude to the death by which certain benefits were accrued to mankind; it was Jesus raising the stakes before the rulers of the land, demanding follow me or kill me – such was his determination to make discipleship available to the nation. And in Gethsemane he waits to see which it will be.

6. The God who waits

So the climax of Jesus' life is reached in his passion, not his death. Jesus, in handing himself over, in passing from action to passion, enacts and discloses that which is deepest of divinity; he discloses the God who himself, of his own will, is handed over from action to passion.

The Christian church, under the influence of Greek philosophical thought, has taught that God is impassible, not dependent on what happens in the world. But suppose it had taught the opposite. That would imply a relationship of mutuality between God and the world; but that in turn would open him to manipulation. And so we say he must be impassible. But really neither will do. God is not passible; but there is disclosed in Jesus a free activity of God which culminates in the surrender of freedom, in the handing over of himself, in a willed transition to passion. Jesus works towards a climax in which he must wait on the decisions and deeds of men. *Deus non passibilis sed passus*. God is not passible but he chooses to become so. So with us when we love we wait for acceptance or rejection, understanding or misunderstanding, which either fulfils what we have offered or makes it vain. By loving we destine ourselves to waiting. It is our choice; but one that when we make it reveals our highest nature. So with God; and so they fell to the ground in amazement as they saw his glory in Jesus.

7. The stature of waiting

We live in a world which encourages children to be busy and applauds elderly people for keeping active; but our encouragement and applause has little to do with the worth or beauty of what emerges from their activity. Activity which is unproductive in these terms is still respected. And more and more the world makes us wait; and waiting brings frustration because it prevents activity. And yet waiting is caring, and caring is creative – naturalists waiting in a hide, lovers waiting for one another, scientists waiting for outcomes, artists waiting on what will emerge from the strokes of their brushes. Others wait uncreatively, in a way which is imposed not chosen. Yet by waiting we become aware of our needs, and of powers and qualities in the world which otherwise would go unrecognised. As we wait, we invest the world with the possibility and power of meaning; as does God. So waiting cannot be a degraded condition, one of diminished human dignity; Christian waiting it is a corrective to the public presupposition that human dignity is bound up with human activity, with initiating and creating and achieving and earning. Paints picture of a dying man, lying in bed, not writing to change the world as before, but lying there and understanding it, aware of its beauty, of its movement, its wonder and terror. We are creators with God, as is often said; but also we wait with God, handed over to the world to receive its meaning, not as a photographic imprint but in its vastness and delicacy, beauty and squalor, good and evil. He is not diminished, but invested with enormous dignity. He stands beside God.

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