



## A Journey of Continuous Dimensions

On a recent Antioch weekend, one of the presenters, Wil Crowley, reflecting on the nature of the Christian journey, shared that scene in the film *Shrek 2* between Shrek and Donkey

Donkey: Are we there yet?  
Shrek: No  
Donkey: Are we there yet?  
Fiona: Not yet.  
Donkey: Are we there yet?  
Fiona: No.  
Donkey: Are we there yet?  
Shrek: Yes  
Donkey: Really?  
Shrek; No  
Donkey: Are we there yet?  
Fiona: No.  
Donkey: Are we there yet?  
Shrek: No  
Donkey: Are we there yet?  
Shrek and Fiona: NO!

The journey into discipleship often feels similarly. We have a sense of the destination for which we long, and to which we are committed, but its realisation never seems quite within our reach.

We can place on ourselves however, a misplaced expectation that we will one day 'arrive', as it were, and have the destination within our possession. This anticipation is misplaced because, in fact, we are on a continuous journey which, precisely because of its eternal orientation, will never end. This was the fourth century Gregory of Nyssa's insight: even 'heaven' is not a destination arrived at merely for our rest. The eternity of God necessitates that the journey continues to unfold even in heaven – although, to our reassurance, he put before us that this would become a journey "from glory to glory." Given that desire itself has an intrinsic restlessness about it, we will still find ourselves, through our desire, to be led eternally into the infinite horizon of God's embrace when our desire is free to be fully itself, as it will be in heaven.

In the meantime we are caught in the constancy of journeying that genuine conversion entails. Conversion is a way of being. It is a way of living. It is constant mindfulness of the call 'to turn from' at one and the same time as sustained acknowledgement of the call 'to turn towards.' This dual awareness sets up a tension within discipleship that is never resolved, in the sense that it is ever-present. Sin and grace co-exist within us; good and evil are always

present. The life of the Spirit finds itself in constant opposition to “the flesh” (the principle of fragmentation and disunity) – as St. Paul expresses it.

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other . . .”  
(Galatians 5:17)

In other words we never come to a point in our life where the tension is not present. It is our awareness of the tension inherent in conversion that changes and grows. What changes is not, thus, the eradication of “the flesh” to use St Paul’s phrase, so that there is now ‘only’ the Spirit, or the weeding out of sin so that there is now only untrammelled grace, or the elimination of evil within our hearts so that now only goodness reigns. No, what changes, rather, is the depth of our awareness of the tension that constitutes our identity as Christians – the mindfulness of this movement ‘from’ something and ‘towards’ something. What changes is the breadth of the acknowledgement of the two-fold movement of conversion into which we have been impelled by our discipleship of the Crucified-Risen Christ. We are caught up in his dying and rising. His death and resurrection live within our hearts as a constant tension. It is because we are paschal people as Christian disciples that we are also radically a pilgrim people, caught between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet.’ We are an ‘in between people’ and there is a liberation in accepting this.

Lent is a particular time in which we become conscious of this constitutive dimension of our discipleship. In particular it is a time in which we are invited to recognise that we have embarked on that journey between fear and love. Pope Benedict recently put this journey in these extraordinary words:

“We are weakened by an intense influence, which wounds our capacity to enter into communion with the other. By nature, we are open to sharing freely, but we find in our being a strange force of gravity that makes us turn in and affirm ourself above and against others: this is egoism, the result of original sin. Adam and Eve, seduced by Satan’s lie . . . . replaced the logic of trusting in Love with that of suspicion and competition; the logic of receiving and trustfully expecting from the Other with anxiously seizing and doing on one’s own, experiencing, as a consequence, a sense of disquiet and uncertainty? How can we free ourself from this selfish influence and open ourself to love?

. . . it is thus necessary to leave that illusion of self-sufficiency, the profound state of closure . . . . In other words, what is needed is an even deeper ‘exodus’ than that accomplished by God with Moses, a liberation of the heart, which the Law on its own is powerless to realize.

. . . Conversion to Christ, believing in the Gospel, ultimately means this: to exit the illusion of self-sufficiency in order to discover and accept one’s own need – the need of others and God, the need of his forgiveness and his friendship . . .<sup>1</sup>

As Pope Benedict XVI taught us earlier, this is the meaning of love:

Love is indeed ‘ecstasy’, not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, “The Justice of God has been Manifested through Faith in Jesus Christ,” Lenten Message for 2010, (5 February 2010)

discovery and indeed the discovery of God: “Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it.” (Lk 17:33)<sup>2</sup>

At the great Vigil of Easter we will hear the story once again of the Exodus of the Chosen People out of slavery in Egypt into the freedom of the land of Canaan. We will remember this as an event of history. However, this historical event is a paradigm of that Exodus that characterises our own hearts now. In Christ, we are people of exodus, people always caught into the vortex of a movement from the places of fear in our life to the places of love, from the places of shame to the places of dignity, from the places of bitterness to the places of openness, from the places of estrangement to the places of hospitality, from the places of death to the places of life. May the journey upon which we have found ourselves in fascination with the Crucified-Risen One never stop unfolding.

“Are we there yet?” NO!

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<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est: On Christina Love*, Encyclical Letter (25 December 2005), n..6.