

Acceleration, a sermon given on 21 November 2021 by Jordan Redding

For our second reading today, I would like to read a poem, which isn't from scripture. The last few weeks, a group has been gathering on Sunday evenings in the Gathering Area to talk about faith, God, and life. The group was asked at the final gathering to offer some words that articulated for them something of God or the nature of life. Simon chose this poem. It is a poem that has been significant for him in his journey. I share it with his permission tonight.

On the surface the poem is fairly obviously about the thrill of driving. It describes the moment of turning a corner at great speed, finding that perfect balance, so that you accelerate out of the corner. And yet as Simon is quick to point out, that surface meaning can be a deeper metaphor for life.

Tonight, I would like to briefly reflect on the poem in conversation with the scripture passage we just heard to explore something of the life of faith...

You
see the corner
closing in rapidly as the scenery
blurs by at blinding speed.
Taking your foot off of the throttle, you
slam on the brakes. The G-force from the
deceleration immediately dominates your
senses and the tires scream out as they
fight against the road surface. The seatbelt
digs into your flesh. The tach needle shoots
up at every shift downward. Letting off the
brakes slightly, you turn the wheel gradually
but with confidence. The G's from the
deceleration lessen while horizontal G's take
over, ramming your body against the side
of the bucket seat. You're aiming for just
one sweet spot in the corner. It's the point
where centrifugal and cornering forces reach
their equilibrium, where they are all at once
replaced with acceleration.

So what does this poem have to tell us about faith? I offer four things:

I. Faith has to do with real life

I didn't mention where the poem comes from. It actually comes from a gaming manual for Gran Turismo 5, which is a Playstation driving simulator game. It aims to simulate the experience, the thrill of driving, articulated in the poem. But there comes a point, where the game simply doesn't do justice to the real deal. The simulation can only prepare you so much. Real driving, driving at speed, still requires practice in a real car.

Once you get in a real car there is more at stake. At those speeds, there is thrill but there is also real danger. Calculating the corner wrong can lead to spinning off, crashing the car, injury, even death. In that sense everything is at stake. And yet precisely because of the danger, the thrill is incomparably greater than a mere driving simulator. It can be a matter of life and death.

Paul uses language of life and death to talk about faith. For him, faith isn't just a set of ideas about God. It's not just a nice inner feeling. There's a lot at stake for Paul. *Everything* at stake, even. We had been *dead* to our trespasses and sins, but *now* we have been born again, "made alive together with Christ".

And when Paul talks about being "made alive", he's talking about very practical stuff. No hypotheticals or abstract ideas or simulations. When he writes to the community of Ephesus, he is calling them into a new way of living together in community that addresses just about every aspect of everyday human life together. The nitty gritty stuff. The messy stuff. How we treat others. How we relate to those who are different to us. How we use our words. How we approach alcohol. How we deal with sexual attraction or greed. These are the issues of everyday life.

All that to say, we can read about Jesus in the Bible, we can study the idea of God, we can watch others practice religion from afar, with nothing at stake – but at a certain point it's not enough. There comes a point where you need to put the playstation controller down, get behind the wheel, leap into faith, into this new way of life with God and one another, to taste and see that the Lord is good.

II. Faith resists easy answers

There can be a temptation, I think, to use God as a projection of our values, reducing life down to black and white, right or wrong. But real life is complex. Take our poem for instance. It describes a brief moment in time. Turning a corner at high speed takes a couple of seconds. And yet, in that instant there is so much going on. It's not simply a matter of the driver driving a car. Yes, the driver is in control of the steering wheel, and the brakes, and the accelerator. But the driver is also being *acted upon*.

Once you build up speed, you are at the mercy of the momentum of the car and the external forces acting upon it. The air resistance. The G-force as you decelerate. The horizontal forces as you turn. The friction of the road. The driving conditions. The weight of the car. And so on.

Paul uses a mysterious phrase. He talks about being subjected to "the ruler of the power of the air" – a phrase which to me took on new meaning when we think of the invisible forces acting on a car. It's a good metaphor for our human condition.

We are active agents, behind the wheel, free to make our own decisions. And yet we also *acted upon* by economic, social, cultural, political, environmental forces. We are influenced at any moment by our friends, our family, our colleagues, our enemies. The decisions we make affect others and the decisions of others affect us. We are not islands. In fact, we are in a sense preconditioned to the choices we make by the world we live in. We are free and yet, in a

profound way, we are not free. “Woe is me,” Isaiah said, “for I am a man of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips.” As Paul phrases it, “following the course of the world”, “following the ruler of the power of the air”.

Life is complex. And following Jesus in the midst of it – navigating that line around the tight corner – must be carefully, prayerfully discerned together. In the reading of scripture. In the listening to one another. In the breaking bread with one another. And it must be discerned again, and again for every corner as we “lean into”, “turn into” Christ, learning what it means to be faithful in any given moment. Faith seeking understanding.

There’s no easy solution, no one-time decision here where we suddenly have everything figured out. There is just the messiness of everyday life being disrupted by the grace of God; everyday life in which we are learning, in all our vulnerability and weakness, what it means to love as God first loved us.

III. Faith is life awakening to the Spirit

We often think of faith, especially in a Western frame of thinking, as primarily something I do e.g. “*I believe* in God.” But it’s not as simple as that, is it? We’ve already talked about how we human beings are deeply connected. We are profoundly shaped by those around us and by the socio-cultural world in which we live. If this is true of other decisions we make in life, it is also true of faith.

In fact, in our reading today, Paul explicitly says, we were “saved by grace through faith” which is *not* our own doing but is *a gift of God*. Faith is awakened in us.

Again, I think the image of the driver turning the corner is helpful here. The driver is fully participant in driving the car. As I’ve said, they operate the steering wheel and the brakes and the accelerator. But they’re also acted upon by these powerful forces.

It seems to me that the driver manages the corner by becoming perfectly attuned to, intimately aware of, those external forces. The driver *feels* the pull of the car and drives in a way that is attentive, responsive, entirely open to the moment. We could say the actions of the driver in that moment are perfectly aligned, in unity with, the forces on the car, so that the car is able to accelerate out of the corner.

I wonder if we can think of relationship with God in a similar way. In prayer, we are becoming intimately aware of God’s presence with us. We are awakening to the Spirit’s leading in every moment, opening ourselves up so that our thoughts, our words, our actions, our being are increasingly aligned with Christ. This intimate *communing* with God, most vividly pointed to in the Communion meal, is a gift of grace, of God’s coming to be with us and in us by the Spirit. And yet, the more we enter into that reality, the more our life together images the life of Christ, the more our “works”, as Paul calls them, reflect the “good works for which we were created.”

Which brings me to my final point...

IV. Faith births joy

Our reading today finishes with Paul articulating a vision for human life: “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” We have been created *for* fullness of life in Christ with God. We have been created for goodness’ sake. As a blessing and to be a blessing.

Joy. I want to return to the driver one last time. It’s notable the driver doesn’t just survive the turn, slowing down out of fear of what could be. Rather there’s a recklessness as the driver hurtles into the corner at speed. And yet the speed is needed so that the G-forces acting on the car reach a point of equilibrium so that the car accelerates out of the corner. This is not life captive to fear, but life freed from fear, life lived in eager anticipation for what could be.

So it is with the life of faith. God’s intention for us is not merely to survive. To live life captive to the fear of crashing and burning. But to enjoy life and life in fullness. To live in eager expectation of a God who is disrupting our world with grace. In Paul’s words we are “made alive with Christ”, set free from sin and the fear of death that binds us, and caught up in this new way of being human together.

Or as the Westminster Confession puts it: what is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever. So may it be for us. And so may it be for you, Simon, this day and every day. Amen.

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