ON RECEIVING AN INHERITANCE

Confessions of a Former Marginaholic

James Alison

TALK OF MARGINALISATION AND ALIENATION has often enough been bunk, and pernicious bunk at that. I am not making this claim as someone who has always been above such bunk, or who has not experienced the powerful moral forces that are at work when such words are being used. Quite the contrary. Over the last twenty years or so, I have regularly danced, more or less feverishly, to such tunes. My claim is that of the recovering marginaholic. Let me try to explain what I mean.

Some fifteen years ago I went to live in Brazil, in order to do my theological studies as a Dominican. It was the height of the boom in liberation theology. My way of dealing with my own sense of marginalisation as a gay man, unable to fit in with any of the power structures, or to belong in any way at all, in my country, was to get out, to go into exile. After all, if you do not belong, it is easier to live in a foreign country than in your own.

Once I arrived in Brazil, I tried to face the world of AIDS, which was beginning to emerge powerfully there. For me, a gay man with a conscience still bound by the voices of society and Church, AIDS opened up the possibility of being *good*; it gave me a ground on which I could justify myself, prove that I might after all be a good thing. I remember the pleasure I felt when one of the leading voices of liberation in my community at the time solemnly informed me that working for people with AIDS wasn't really a liberating thing at all, since it didn't transform society. The only way to transform society was to work with a political party or a trade union. This of course merely confirmed me in what I had begun to suspect about the liberation 'thing', namely that its doyens had a peculiar knack of associating liberation with things which wouldn't cause them to lose their reputations. I had caught him out. By identifying with the world of

The Way, 42/1 (January 2003), pp. 22-33

AIDS, I could be even more marginalised than the self-appointed guardians of holy marginalisation. And therefore, of course, even more holy. My sense of identity was very much dependent on being rejected. I knew, or thought I knew, that that was what the Gospel demanded, and I had managed to fool myself that my search for being marginalised was of God.

How did this pan out in the actual time I spent with people dying from AIDS? I have not yet been able to give any satisfactory account to myself of this part of my life, of what it means. I hope that the people I accompanied will welcome me into the heavenly halls as their brother; but if so, then it will be because they have been able to see through the mixed motives and hugely complex series of needs which I had when I was with them—needs which, as I was vaguely aware even then, had more to do with me than with them. Let me put it this way: it was as though I was a voyeur of those who occupied the place of shame and ultimate marginalisation. I was terrified of being where they were, not only because of the disease and its ravages, but because of the shame involved. As a priest I was able, of course, to offer them sacraments and the other gifts of priestly ministry. I remember even then being struck by how they were able to receive a power and transforming grace from the sacraments. This power and grace had absolutely nothing to do with how I was feeling—my eyes were scarcely daring to look at what I was doing. It was as if in fact the sign was working quite independently of its minister, who was a sort of Baalam's Ass of *ex opere operato* grace.

I approached the place of shame and marginalisation as a voyeur

Looking back now, I think I can see what was missing in this powerful compulsion to such ambiguous compassion, and I will try to expand on this below. But one can put it in a nutshell: what was missing was the ability to like anyone. I couldn't like them; I couldn't like myself. It was as though I was dancing terrified before the veil of a ghastly reality—a veil that I didn't dare to go through—while remaining quite unable to like either those on either this side or that side of the veil.

Something of this became a bit clearer to me when I moved later on to Bolivia. You can't, I thought to myself, get much more marginalised than living in Bolivia; surely therefore it must be an heroically holy thing to choose to work here. And yet one of my abiding memories of the eighteen months I spent in that beautiful, and indeed severely marginalised country, teaching in its Catholic University, is of my

complete inability to like the place or its people. Yet again I managed to inspire others to find it necessary to get rid of me; yet again I set myself up to become holy by being rejected—what I have referred to in a book I wrote as 'the self-canonization of the self-victim'.[1]

It was as though I was not dealing with a real place and real people, but with some sort of sounding board I needed—something at which I could hurl my *Angst*. However, here I began to be a little clearer about what was really happening. Not far beneath the surface of my own apparently confident self-presentation there were gnawing doubts. Perhaps my real agenda was far from holy. Perhaps a friend of mine was right when he tried to show me, after I had managed to figure for the *n*th time at the centre of a bout of sacrificial violence, that I was wandering around with a large label pinned to my back saying 'kick me'.

An Experience of Dying

The breakthrough probably happened in the period following this time in Bolivia. Three things came together over the course of a year. Firstly, I managed to finish my doctoral thesis; I had never before completed an educational process, and thus for the first time in my life I felt I had successfully concluded something. Secondly, the Dominican superiors in South America joined forces to get rid of me (something for which, I should make quite clear, I am now profoundly grateful). Thirdly, the man in Brazil whom I loved in died suddenly and unexpectedly. He was three weeks into the first infection to which his weakened immune system had opened him after some ten years of being HIV+ (this was all before the cocktail of drugs currently in use became available).

Finishing a Project

In retrospect, I can see these three events as setting off a process which I can only refer to as dying. A couple of years later, I began to understand that in a real sense I had died. Let me try to explain. My doctoral thesis (appropriately called *The Joy of Being Wrong*) had been, for some time, my way of surviving, of holding on to a sense of doing something worthwhile, a way of achieving something. About six months before I finished, a French Dominican asked me what was my ambition in life; 'to finish my thesis', I replied. The truth was that I

[1] *Raising Abel* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), p. 184.

didn't have any ambitions after that, because I just wanted to die. However, I needed to have done at least something first; this, I hoped, would be it. And as I finished it, I began to realise that I was now ready to go: I simply didn't have any ambition left, any desire to do anything. There was also a strange sense that I had somehow been reached by whatever is meant by the phrase: 'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ' (Romans 8:1). And this was accompanied by a certain interior collapsing with relief. Some sort of battle was over. I had no ambition left, and nothing to win; I only desired to die. Yet here something was beginning to empower me, empower me to 'walk not after the flesh but after the spirit' (Romans 8:4).

'You Are Not One Of Us'

Then there was my repudiation by the Dominican superiors in South America. This gave me a clean break, and therefore some relief. But it was also, of course, a shock. They seemed to be saying to me something like this: 'Your attempt to have a life project here in this continent has failed, it is over. You are not one of us.' And they were, of course, quite right. I had obscurely been using them, just as I had been using the people with AIDS whom I had accompanied, and just as I had been using Bolivia. They even had the decency to repudiate me in a violent and irrational way. This meant I was spared the humiliation of having to recognise publicly that they were right, and that I had been barking up the wrong tree for years. I was able to go off with my dignity of the destroyed-one intact, so bad did they make themselves look.

At the same time, however, I knew, deep down, that I had been let off, and rejoiced in the fact. My membership of my religious order was annulled; I was deeply relieved that the game was up. I was, I should say, also simply terrified of what this would mean: I had no idea of any other way of living than the institutionally protected way in which I had lived my whole life. The idea of making a living, of surviving off my own bat, was completely terrifying to me. So it did take something like a year before I dared, with my hands covering my eyes, to walk the plank and fall into the rest of my life. But this experience was also a form of death: the death of a whole fake life project and of all the props for survival which it afforded: home, country, 'family', profession, training, ability to be of worth in public, ability to tell a life story which makes sense. These are things usually lost at death.

I was deeply relieved that the game was up

A Friend Dies

Then the third element of my dying was the death of my friend Laércio in Brazil (I was in Chile at the time, packing my stuff so as to go back and be with him, since at the time 80 per cent of seropositive patients died within five months of presenting their first symptom). Again in retrospect, I can see that here for the first time I had actually managed to make an autonomous decision to do something genuinely loving. I had taken the decision, too late though it turned out to be, to go back and be with someone, perhaps at some risk to my own security. It was not just that my last ambition had died and I had literally nothing left to do. In the days after Laércio's death, I realised that the love I had felt was genuine; it was nothing to be ashamed of; it was something that could really happen; indeed, this love was what life was all about. It was a completely new and destabilising possibility, completely disarming my strategies of careful self-protection against the fullness of life while dancing on the edge of marginality. I knew all this as a sense of not really having lost Laércio at all; indeed the only way I could respond, could express my gratitude, was by actually accepting this kick into life which he was offering me.

Furthermore, something else gradually dawned on me. Because I found myself actually loving Laércio, the place of shame which had been made visible for me by gay men dying of AIDS was suddenly no longer a place of shame. If Laércio whom I loved, and whom I knew to be wonderful, could have undergone this place of shame and death, then so could I. It didn't hold any terror for me any longer, nor any fascination. I was no longer dancing frenziedly round the edge of the veil; I had found myself sucked through it. At the same time, there was a sense of having at last been able to grasp something of what Jesus' promise of eternal life was about. And something too about how Baptism is a death undergone in advance, so that death no longer needed to dominate me. It was not that shame was suddenly cancelled; rather I discovered that shame held in love as something tender and delicate is not really shame at all, but a certain rejoicing.

These then were the three factors which seemed to combine in my experience of dying. I lost my ambition and need to succeed; I lost a fake and compulsive life project; and my sense of shame, something that had defined me, was transformed—transformed into something

holding neither fear nor fascination. It opened up the possibility of just being human. And even of liking the possibility.

On Being an Heir

What is life like in this place where death is somehow behind me? The word that best suggests what is growing on me is 'heir'. It is as though I am receiving an inheritance.

Let me explain. The Bible passage I have in mind is this:

> . . . and if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?[2]

The heir is the owner of the estate. The heir is not marginalised, in any way. You are absolutely central. The whole estate is going to come to you. Whatever is going on, whatever battles and squabbles seem to be dominating the scene, whoever seems to be in and whoever seems to be out—none of this matters to you one bit. For you are and remain the heir; you know you're eventually going to inherit it all whatever happens.

This idea corresponds to the experience of living as having died that I have been trying to describe to you. Increasingly I seem to find a sense of being in on the centre of what it's all about. It is not as though

[2] Galatians 3:29–4:9. Any attempt to replace 'sons' with a more inclusive expression here distorts the meaning.

I am making a claim to power, or indeed any claim at all. It's more a realisation that I am being given something, or, more accurately, being given the capacity to be someone. And this someone is taking part in a huge and largely hidden adventure.

Being In On The Centre

I am not quite sure where this experience of being an heir is leading; let me nevertheless try to tease out some aspects of it. In the first place, there is a sense of being in on the centre of things without actually *being* the centre. It is Christ who is in the centre of the experience, the one who occupies the place of shame and marginalisation and victimage. This leads to a paradox. Because Christ occupies this place in freedom, and because Christ likes us, we can have a strange sense of being in on the centre; he has made it a place not to be feared. At the same time, it is no longer a specifically sacred space, and therefore no longer a frightening place. Thus, in another way, there is no centre at all any more: the centre is everywhere, including where I am. Perhaps Pascal was getting close to this when he described nature as a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.[3]

One can put the point more concretely by looking at what Christ does with religious institutions. On the one hand, Christ does away with both Temple and Church in so far as these are institutions with sacred centres of mimetic fascination, institutions which exercise a powerful draw on the imagination and emotions of those who live close to them, both attracting and repelling them. At the same time, he actively creates a new Temple, founds a Church, as something which is universal—something which has no centre and thus no periphery, a community where there are no outsiders or insiders. When I say I feel I'm an heir, receiving an inheritance, what I mean is that I'm somehow finding myself in on that collapse and in on that new creation. I'm a receptive participant in that process. The new creation is my project; and yet it is not mine at all, but rather something given to me—given so that I can be part of it.

The new creation is my project; yet it is not mine at all, but something given

One of the side-effects of this awareness is an increasing inability to take seriously the need both to be 'for' the Church and 'against' it, which seems to be so strong with us. It often seems as though on the

[3] *Pensées*, n. 72.

one hand our goodness depends on there being a Church, yet on the other we need to be able to kick against the Church in order to be good: we need to be on the centre and at the margins at the same time. It now seems to me, however, that we get into this situation because we are driven by a need to justify ourselves over against someone else, by a sense that I can become good only if there are bad guys for me to battle against. We fall victim to an addictive pattern of desire, an inability to receive death and goodness and life as gifts to be relaxed into, and thus a compulsion to hold on to *something.* Paul is speaking of something beyond all this. If we hear his message, we need no longer be ashamed of being insiders. For in truth, we are neither insider nor outsider; inside and outside have passed away.

Being On The Periphery

At the risk of contradicting myself, I would also like to talk about a sense of being on the periphery. I use 'periphery' rather than 'margins' deliberately. The centre of things is Christ, and God's dynamic movement towards us so as to make us active shared participants in creation. This centre is an overwhelming power and presence, one that makes it a delight to be a recipient, a peripheral recipient, of all this goodness. Our sense of self is dependent on the 'other', which is massively prior to the formation of the 'I' of any of us. The gospel tells us that this 'other' is hugely and powerfully benevolent; it is OK to relax into receiving its power and benevolence, to be swept up by it, to let go.

However, this sense of being peripheral to a hugely benevolent, powerful other is not at all the same as being 'marginal'. It includes the realisation that there is no one who is not just such a peripheral; it then gives us the possibility of discovering fellow peripherals, who, like me, are receiving an inheritance, being called into rejoicing. But with a difference. None of us has to achieve anything, to get anything right, to be a success. I can therefore rejoice in others. I am in no sort of competition with them; I do not need to protect myself against their mortality, their time-wasting, their deficiencies, or indeed against my own. For it is precisely in this fallible state that we are liked; precisely thus that we are being gifted to become something new.

If religions and societies are organized round a sacred centre, they will generate margins. These margins are dangerous places. Much effort must be expended not to be among the losers, whether in terms of

finance, health, reputation or whatever. The Temple which Christ is building is neither sacred nor a centre. It creates a generous spaciousness, where we delight in dwelling among the weak and those of little account; there is, always, despite what the poet said, 'world enough and time'. The gospel generates a peripheral existence—an existence which enables us to like being among those who have nowhere to go. They are neither competitors, nor sign of scarcity; not threat of loss, nor object of compassion, but sign of gift and shared story that has no end.

Complacency

The third theme I want to tease out is that of complacency. Isn't there something complacent about this sense of receiving an inheritance? Doesn't the New Testament exhort us, in rather athletic-sounding language, to keep striving, keep persevering? There are always little voices from my old self kicking in to tell me that I should, like a good evangelical, be somehow doing more. But I think those voices are wrong. Contrary to its bad name, complacency is rather a good thing. 'Complacency' means dwelling with liking in something. The Father says of his Son, 'This is my son in whom I am complacent' (Mark 1:11). If you want to know that I am not making this up, here is St Jerome's translation: *Tu es Filius meus dilectus; in te conplacui*. If the Father dwells with liking in someone or on someone, then to receive the Father's regard must involve liking being liked, strange though it may seem. It becomes presumption only if it is held onto as something which is no longer being received, but rather as a possession as that is already held—something closing us off from further delighted growth into the Father's pleasure. We tend to confuse presumption and complacency; we tend to reserve the word 'complacency' to refer only to a closed-off self-satisfaction, to something which cuts one off from involvement with others, from vulnerability towards others.

Complacency, properly understood, is more positive than this. Though it can degenerate into presumption, it can also deepen into compassion. Someone who is liked who can appreciate what is really likeable about another person, and bring that out. I remember reading a story of a gay man who, together with his partner, rented a video. Unbeknown to the man, his partner had previously acted in porno videos of a rather violent and disturbing sort before they met. The shop assistant at the video store that evening put the wrong video into the

box, and—hey presto—they suddenly found themselves watching a degrading film in which one of them was playing a central part. Needless to say, the former actor rushed out of the room with shame and fear at his being uncovered, and only dared to come back in several hours later. He found his partner just sitting and crying in front of a blank TV screen. The former actor imagined that this meant it was all over between them, and that he should collect his things and move out. But no, it turned out that the man was crying because of the debasement to which someone he loved had subjected himself, or been subjected; he was crying with compassion as he saw something of the sort of deep dark place his partner must have been in.

Only someone who is really aware that they are liked, only someone who is really complacent, can defuse another's place of shame and make it spacious. And it is out of complacency that liking can flow to those who are like. If I am complacent, I am not frightened of being like someone, liking them, being liked by them. To share with them in equality is not a demand or a burden, but part of the discovery of who I am. This discovery occurs as I find a spacious sharing with the one I like—a sharing which is turning me into someone different.

There is something deeply non-moralistic about this. We find ourselves learning to receive the other as gift. It will be apparent that I am still struggling to learn this; I am talking about something that I can only hope to receive. But whatever it is, it draws the sting from the issue of marginalisation, alienation and estrangement.

The marginal can appear demanding, burdensome, reproachful. It can make us feel that relaxing into being loved is something selfish, something that detracts from our being the sacrificial givers we ought to be. We can become anxious: we can fear that having it good, being loved and contented, will make us insensitive to the marginal other, invulnerable to the victim's demands. If I discover myself as loved, and start to relax into that regard, if I come to realise what Paul meant when he spoke of our being known by God, of our being at the periphery of God's regard, will I not then in my complacency lose my anguished sensitivity to the other? Will my ears not become dull to the cry of the oppressed, and my eyes blind to the sufferings of the victim, and will I thus not miss out on salvation?

So there is a sort of trap. I tell myself that I can only be attentive to those on the margin if I myself am discontented and marginalised. Even, however, as I act in this way, I dimly sense that I am only acting out my own drama; there may be no real 'other' in my ken. And when I fully experience receiving an inheritance, the trap vanishes; God's loving regard enables me to like and to be liked. This enables us to be curious, unthreatening, experimental, creative in our relationships with others. It gives us a trust that we will receive all that we need; it holds us open to the irruptions of the other. It is a gift when the other irrupts in my life and causes me to become someone different. They tell a story embracing elements of being human that I couldn't imagine. And only if I understand the other as gift can the marginal other really be other for me—really be part of my being upbuilt by God. Otherwise they are drawn into my defences of a controlled way of being, into my appropriation of goodness. They are being used simply as a sounding board for my own tale of tragic heroism.

What I am talking about here is the experience of being given a heart. Banal though this sounds, it expresses what was lacking in my sense of shame and in my frantic batting about in the margins. I was so ashamed that I didn't have a heart, that I didn't have any of the right reactions, didn't feel compassion, pity, love. I was so ashamed that I would be found out as being this heartless person that I fled to the ends of the earth. I covered up; I put myself in places where no one would be able to understand me, and therefore no one would be able to discern the huge hole where my heart should have been. The Father knows marginality, alienation and scarcity, pain and death, only as surds that weigh too heavily on us. It is his desire to empower us, so that we can imagine our way creatively into playfulness. What could be a greater inheritance than to receive a new heart, to receive His heart?[4]

James Alison is a Catholic theologian, priest and author, who has lived and worked in Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile and the United States, as well as his native England. He earned his doctorate in theology from the Jesuit Faculty in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and is the author of several books. Having lived with the Dominican Order between 1981 and 1995, he currently works as an itinerant preacher, lecturer and retreat giver. He lives in London.

[4] This article originated as a talk for the British and Irish Association of Practical Theology Annual Conference, held in July 2002.


HIC EST
FILIUS ME US DILEC
TUS IN QUO
MIHI BE
NE
C
OM
PLACUI