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MISTAKEN FOR GOD *by Jim Green*

A wise man once said to me, after I?d shared some ongoing agony about my romantic relationship, that, ?*?hmm, it?s possible you?ve mistaken your girlfriend for God*?.

This stopped me in my tracks. I?ve often returned to the mystery of that utterance, with much heart-scratching and head-searching, over the years since it was made.
What can my friend have meant?

I came to think of his insight as being of a piece with the mystical teaching that only complete detachment from creatures - all created things ? can bring about union with the divine.

And by ?union with the divine? we mean what, precisely? Well, I have partly understood it as ending the repeated cycle of longing, disappointment and dissatisfaction which seems to be the default setting for humankind. Perhaps reaching the place that St Augustine points towards: ?*Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you?.* And that Julian of Norwich knew about*: "God, of Thy goodness, give me Thyself; for Thou art enough to me? And if I ask anything that is less, ever shall I be in want, for only in Thee have I all*."

St John of the Cross has been there too:

From creatures now my soul is free,
Detached from all created things;
Now she at last has taken wings
And lives her life delectably.
To God, and God alone, she clings

Where does that leave all the lovely creatures that we are surrounded by? My girlfriend? The autumn leaves? Raindrops on roses? Whiskers on kittens? Bright copper kettles? And warm woollen mittens, if it comes to that? What else is there?

The great danger in this teaching of detachment (if misunderstood) is that we end up deciding that everything in the phenomenal field (all we see, think, touch, experience) is just so much bath-water to be thrown out. Which, I suppose, is why Advent and Christmas concentrate our

attention so wonderfully on something minute, particular and holy. There is a baby. The one thing not to be thrown out. Perhaps we?d better start recognising that the bath-water is holy too?

?For everything that lives is holy, life delights in life? ? thus William Blake. Is he having a go at St John of the Cross, Dame Julian and St Augustine? ? so worries the dualistic mind. And the fretting continues: ?How can it be that my girlfriend (raindrops, whiskers, kettles etc) is in some way God and then again, at the same time, in a very definite way, isn?t??

In perplexity, the stubbornly dualistic mind could do much worse than listen to His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI:

According to John of the Cross, all that exists, created by God, is good. Through creatures we may arrive at the discovery of the One who has left within them a trace of himself. Faith, in any case, is the one source given to the human being to know God as he is in himself, as the Triune God. All that God wished to communicate to man, he said in Jesus Christ, his Word made flesh. Jesus Christ is the only and definitive way to the Father (cf. Jn 14:6). Any created thing is nothing in comparison to God and is worth nothing outside him, consequently, to attain to the perfect love of God, every other love must be conformed in Christ to the divine love.
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I?ve underlined the passages that seem to leap out, urgently demanding the engagement of my heart, the attention of my being, if I am to understand aright what ?creatures? are.

My attention was urgently demanded in just the same way by a fellow meditator?s blog in these web pages not so long ago. Stefan Reynolds, in his excellent piece on Marriage and Monastic Oblation, makes this world-transforming declaration: ?My wife is Christ to me?. This startling assertion solves the problem that was giving a headache to our old friend/enemy the dualistic mind. And my mind won?t get the solution by ?working out? what this *means*, but by gazing at that ?impossible? truth in the way that we are invited to gaze at the ?impossible? cross, and so *change* my mind.

A changed mind (?transformed?, rather than one that jumps back and forth between conflicting positions) would see that we can mistake any *things* for God (girls in white dresses, snowflakes, silver-white winters,) if we look at them with anything other than God?s eyes. But if we are able to love our favourite things well (restore them to themselves, not turn them into brown paper packages tied up with string for our own use) then we are *taking* them for God, un-thinging them.

If we have ever had a taste, no matter how fleeting, of that changed mind - of Love (and we all have because Love is the cause of our existence and continuance), then we will surely know somewhere, crucially, that this mind ? despite all appearances and most of the evidence - is the real default setting for humankind.

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