

“flesh” and “trash”. Cynically he turns the word “love” into an instrument of deception and entrapment. To use words so that their beauty, promise and precision are jeopardised is a basic form of despising: it poisons the ground water of human life. Despising people goes along with the perversion of language.<sup>14</sup>

With language perverted, despising can appear to be an acceptable way of seeing life. Sometimes, the despising cloaks itself in what is held to be necessary or normal. It becomes invisible.<sup>15</sup> Despising is not confined to obviously despicable people. A veneer of caring may disguise despising. Paternalism runs the risk of putting people down because it builds its own status and role on the dependence of those who need to be looked after. If it sees nothing more than this dependence, it may fall into despising. Was the Grand Inquisitor a despiser?<sup>16</sup> He cared for people by refusing to risk letting them live in the freedom Christ brought and represented. Thus he diminished them. So, teachers, managers, social workers, parents, pastors and politicians can be despisers. They are not saved by having the best of motives. The warning against despising was given to disciples who were close to Jesus: it is a message for all of us.

Despising is doubly evil because it rates others under their true worth and leads the despiser to over-value himself. Damaging both parties, it makes for an utterly rotten relationship, in which is no truth or hope or friendship. No one is so little as to be looked down on, since Christ died for them.<sup>17</sup> No excellence qualifies anyone to be a despiser, since God the high and holy one dwells only with the humble.<sup>18</sup>

### Despising: personal, supra-personal and impersonal

The prime *locus* of despising is in interpersonal relationships between persons and groups. Human life and relations teach us what despising is.<sup>19</sup> Despising takes myriad forms, and life is shot through every day with despising and being despised, as people are tempted to it, suffer it, retaliate and strive to rise above it.



Despising is possible in the world because creatures are limited, vulnerable, insecure and varied. Where there is difference, comparison and competition is inevitable and it can be invidious. Rankings, league tables and hierarchies are useful for some purposes, but they open the door to despising.

Although primarily interpersonal, despising also appears in non-personal forms. The language of despising has a metaphorical capacity to illumine human experience in all its dimensions and contexts, including the non-human and inanimate.

Collisions, losses and put-downs are not always the work of intentional agents; sometimes no human agency can be held responsible for these hurts. Sometimes circumstances are like walls, standing around us, hemming us in. They are blank, faceless, without voices, with no evidence of mind. But they impress our littleness upon us and that is akin to being despised, both as a depressing experience and as a challenge to respond. As the walls close in they "say" to us that we do not count, that all our hopes and values come to nothing and that our self-esteem is futile pretence. They induce a sense of humiliation, unfairness and disempowerment. The poverty in which millions live gives the message, "You don't matter."<sup>20</sup>

Consider death as a despiser. It comes to most people as a natural event in the ordinary course of life and without the action of a human despiser, like a killer or a negligent carer. That I cannot escape death is thus no cause for complaint or grievance against any personal agent. Yet facing death is, for some, at the very least like being despised. It is not only in the Bible that death is seen as the last enemy, provoking fear and complaint.<sup>21</sup> Death brings life to an end. It often appears to crown and confirm the shortfall and unfairness of life, taking away its joy and beauty. It seems to scrap beings, as though on to the rubbish heap; we go through indignity into nothingness. To be brought to nothing – is that not central to the robbery, hurt and injustice felt by anyone who is despised? There is a hostile power at work which has no respect for the worth of beings. Death is the symbol of the despising facing our



creaturely vulnerability. By death, we are despised.

To see an active despiser in the natural event of death is admittedly symbolic: a form of personification. But such ways have value for facing realities we must somehow live with. The mythological should not be overplayed, but it is well-grounded in life-experience, and not to be despised.<sup>22</sup>

Seeing death as a despiser goes along with recognising that the physical environment on earth is not a consistently friendly habitat for humanity.<sup>23</sup> Much of it is hostile to human being. The world is ordered and driven by impersonal structures and processes, at least some of them palpably hostile. It is not surprising that some see human being as but the plaything of higher powers, lacking reliability, love or respect.<sup>24</sup> Any theological attempt to ignore the dark side of experience in the world, on the ground that a loving God is wholly in control of all events global and local, leads us into unreality and incompetence for living. There are various plausible interpretations of our human experience. One that cannot be dismissed without consideration is that we are beset by layers of despising eating back into the foundations of value and meaning. To know and believe God in Christ is to make a stand against this manifold despising. It cannot, however, be resisted by refusing to think about it.<sup>25</sup>

In the Bible and Christian faith traditions there are mythologies and meditations coming out of the experience of people who wrestle with multi-dimensional despising. Through the Psalms we meet people who are surrounded by enemies mocking and wishing them ill. These oppressors engineer death, taking pleasure in bringing their despising to success in the destruction of their victims. The world itself still provokes lament, as in this poem:

*TSUNAMI THEOLOGY*

*God together swept out by the wave  
No habitation left to stand upon the earth  
Sea swallows without comment*



*smooths memory all away  
The children fathers mothers are not*

*Once little ones quite nothing now  
waved away, Tsunami despised  
Died with no arms about them  
No eyes upon them*

*And the children who live still?  
How can we be children without father, mother?  
Rolled still by the wave, trafficked by the sea,  
Let down by tectonic fall*

*Despised by unhomely earth  
Busy with its own story <sup>26</sup>*

## **Don't despise**

Despising has to be taken seriously if Matthew's text, and indeed the Bible and Christian faith, are not to be reduced to pious evasion. It is necessary to register despising as a terrible reality, causing us to stumble on the path into the kingdom of God. Perhaps others have better examples or analyses to give, but we are indicating a way of reckoning with the terrible nature of despising in its many forms. However, this Gospel text does not explore despising as we have been doing. Rather it simply contradicts and forbids the practice of it. And in so doing it takes us into even more mysterious territory.

Matthew 18:10 starts with a simple warning: "Take care that you don't despise one of these little ones who believe in me." And then it concentrates on how despising is opposed, overcome and put aside by God's affirmation. The reason for not despising little ones is explicitly and disturbingly theological: "The angels of the despised little ones always behold the face of my Father in heaven." In contrast with Matthew 18:6, attention is not focused on the offender and his punishment, but rather on the distress and the