

Queerology Episode 98

James Alison is Reimagining Theology

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- Matthias: 00:00 Hey, friends! This is Matthias Roberts, and you're listening to Queerology: A Podcast on Belief and Being. This is Episode 98.
- Dr. Alison: 00:14 I think it's enormously important. The public testimony of being an honest and vulnerable person is inevitably going to put you in the way of danger.
- Matthias: 00:25 James Alison is a Catholic theologian, priest, and author. He's studied, lived, and worked in Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, and the United States, as well as his native England. A systematic theologian by training, James has dedicated much of his life's work to unpacking the insight into desire associated with the philosopher René Girard. We'll get into that.
- Matthias: 00:51 James has a doctorate in theology and is the author of eight books, most recently, *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice—An Introduction to Christianity for Adults*. He is currently a Fellow and the Chair of the Education Committee of Imitatio, an organization that exists to press forward the consequences of René Girard's remarkable insights into human behavior and culture. When not traveling, he lives in Madrid, Spain.
- Matthias: 01:19 This is a little bit of a nerdy episode for me. James Alison may just be my favorite contemporary theologian. He may be my favorite theologian ever. I think that one's still being determined, but... I first discovered his work years ago, when I was starting grad school. He was one of the first theologians that I had to read for one of my early introductory courses. To say that he has flipped my understanding of theology on its head would not be an understatement. His work, alongside Girard's work—it's a game changer.
- Matthias: 01:56 I felt like today might be a good day to release this episode because last episode with Nadia Bolz-Weber, we started talking about Girard a little bit. We didn't get into it a whole lot, but he's a philosopher who just passed away a few years ago who kind of stumbled across a theory that, to me and many, many, many, many other people, makes a whole lot of sense. And Alison, who is this gay Catholic priest, is one of the leading scholars and theologians on taking Girard's philosophy and unpacking it theologically.

Matthias: 02:28 I'm so excited to have Alison on the show today. If you haven't figured it out already, we are talking about theology today. I know sometimes when we have these conversations about theology, about Jesus, about atonement, what Jesus did on the cross—those things, they can be triggering topics. Just be aware and take care of yourself while you listen. You can choose not to listen. No pressure here. And if you listen, be prepared to have your mind blown.

Matthias: 02:57 Also, you don't need to have a theological background or a philosophical background—you don't need to have a familiarity with Girard or what he calls, quote-unquote, "mimetic theory." If those words don't mean anything to you, that's fine. This episode doesn't require that. If you want them to mean something to you after listening to this, go read some of the resources that are out there. Alison is a really great place to start. That *Jesus the Forgiving Victim* book slash e-course—it's an online course—is a really awesome place to start. If not, just listen to the episode, pull out the things that are interesting to you, and move on with your life.

Matthias: 03:39 No announcements today. Let's go ahead and dive in!

Matthias: 03:42 James, welcome!

Dr. Alison: 03:43 Thank you, Matthias! Great pleasure to be with you.

Matthias: 03:45 Yeah, I'm so excited to have you on the show.

Matthias: 03:47 So we'll start with the question that I ask everyone: how would you say that you identify, and how has your faith helped form that identity?

Dr. Alison: 03:55 I am an Englishman of a certain age. I'm 60—a 60-year-old Englishman. My faith journey has been the central journey of my life. I'm a gay man, and that's why the faith journey has been a central part of my life, because it's been a question of survival, really.

Matthias: 04:13 I'm curious about that, because... correct me if I'm wrong, but it's my understanding that you grew up Protestant and then found Catholicism and found some solace in Catholicism. I'm curious to hear more of that story, of realizing you're gay, and the Protestant world, and the Catholic world... I'd love to hear about that.

Dr. Alison: 04:34 Obviously, one can't... labels like "Protestant," in particular, are too broad to be really useful. I was brought up in a hard-line, evangelical Anglican household, which is not what most Americans associate with the Anglican or Episcopalian Church. It's much more like hard Bible-belt. It's a sort of neo-Calvanist form of Anglicanism,

and it's very strictly peniary substitution theory. So that was the world in which I was brought up, and of course, really, if you are brought up in that world and discover yourself to be gay, you are an abomination. You realize very quickly: you are an abomination, and there is really no good in you, and nothing you can do could possibly alter the rules of the game because God has said, and God's word matters more than any amount of scientific knowledge or learning. In other words, you are born into a discussion in which there isn't a discussion about you.

Dr. Alison: 05:29 So I describe my discovery of Catholicism—which happened gradually, through meeting people rather than reading, and, in fact, falling in love with a Catholic boy at school and beginning to get a sense that there was another approach to what it means to be part of Creation, something that's not simply radically depraved—there was a sense I had of moving from an inward and invisible totalitarianism to an outward and visible totalitarianism.

Dr. Alison: 05:57 “Inward and invisible totalitarianism” is because, of course, if you take being an evangelical of that sort seriously, then there is really no one outside you who could possibly be the measure of your soundness. You are your own pope and doctrine commission and all of that, and you are constantly watching over yourself to make sure that you don't get it wrong. The thing about moving from that into the much bigger space of an outward and visible totalitarianism is that you get to see that the outward and visible totalitarianism is basically... how would one say this? It's quirky. Once you see cardinals and bishops, you can't take them too seriously. In other words, you become aware that all the things that, before, you had to run for yourself as a matter of preventing yourself from going to hell are actually run rather badly by other people, and Jesus is not to be too closely identified with them.

Dr. Alison: 06:54 For me, that's part of it, as well as the key factor, which is that Catholicism has always understood that grace perfects nature. In other words, reality as we know it is screwed up, but it's not *radically* screwed up so that its salvation makes it something entirely different. That means that there is a chance that we can learn, from who we are, what is true. That, for me, is the key thing: the gradual realization as a gay man, for whom there was literally nothing to hold on to in terms of what might be true—“Is there a way out of this hole,” “Help, I'm drowning”—to, little by little, it's possible to learn how to trust what we're learning about what is the case about people like me. Guess what? We're discovering that we aren't simply something pathological. It's that very, very slow step-by-step learning which is part of the gift of faith, in which faith enables us to be not frightened of discovery, that, for me as a gay man, was the...

what is the phrase in the psalm? “Lord, thou hast brought me to a broad place.” In other words, a place where after endless climbing through ravines, you can just stand a little. Does that make sense?

- Matthias: 08:07 I think so. Since we’ve talked a little bit before this... I think I mentioned to you... I have been reading much of your work in the last weeks.
- Dr. Alison: 08:16 Oh, confinement reading!
- Matthias: 08:18 Yes. Yes. But also in the last years. I remember the first time that I engaged with a paper that you wrote—it was in my first year of grad school—and it was all about looking at sacrificial systems and putting a radically different take on them than what I had ever come across before. I remember reading it, barely understanding what you were trying to argue but knowing there was something in there. I remember just breaking into tears and crying my way through that piece. So I hear you say something along the lines of finding a place of rest, and I feel like I’ve been discovering that in reading your work. I’m wondering if we can unpack some of what that is. I know that you have a library of work unpacking this, so that’s a really big question, but there are pieces in Girardian theory, mimetic theory, ways you talk about desire, resentment, forgiveness... I’m wondering if we can speak about some of those things.
- Dr. Alison: 09:21 Of course. Of course.
- Matthias: 09:23 And one of the primary things... the very beginning point is this idea of what Jesus did on the cross. You mentioned penal substitutionary atonement earlier. That’s the view that many of us who listen to this show were raised with. But you have a much different view of that, and I’d love to hear about that.
- Dr. Alison: 09:42 The easiest way to describe the difference is to say all the texts used to justify the penal substitution theory of the atonement—all of those texts are true, but all the valences are wrong. All the language makes perfect sense—if you understand it as God demonstrating God’s love by sacrificing Godself in the midst of us for us. In other words, there is a violent divinity whose anger needs assuaging—and it is us. And because God loves us so much, God wants us to get off the nasty slit game which we create amongst ourselves, which includes ganging up together and throwing out weak and dispensable people so as to make ourselves feel good. He knows that that’s a terribly denigrating way of becoming human. So God’s response is, “How can I get these guys to play a better game?” So, giving himself up into the place of our wrath—our justified wrath. “We have a law, and by our law, this man must die.” That’s a very good piece of Johannine irony. Our justified wrath—we’re always

looking and saying, “Someone’s got to pay. Let’s sacrifice all the old people so we can keep the economy going.” You don’t have to go very far to find the old sacred alive and kicking.

Dr. Alison: 11:07 And God is entering into that world of ours and saying, “Hey, guys. You do this to me. And I don’t even hold it against you. I just so long for some of you to be able to recognize that I’m entering into this space so that you never again need to be frightened or ashamed, even of yourselves, at doing this. Allow yourselves to be forgiven by me into forming the beginning of a new way of being human together.” In other words, it’s the exact inverse of the scapegoat mechanism rather than a sanctified version of it, which I’m afraid is what the penal substitution theory turns out being. It definitely involves someone’s wrath or honor needing to be satisfied, and that someone is God, and we remain as, relatively speaking, bystander to this off-scene operation that goes between Father and Son. But that doesn’t reflect at all what’s actually going on in the Scriptures, where it’s clear that it’s Jesus coming from God, doing something to/for/towards us and in our midst so as to show something about God that we couldn’t understand—in other words, God’s love.

Matthias: 12:13 You say over and over again in your work that this is the good news of revealing that God has nothing to do with violence.

Dr. Alison: 12:23 Exactly!

Matthias: 12:24 Which is... That’s hard, at least, for me to wrap my mind around, especially with everything I’ve been taught about God.

Dr. Alison: 12:32 It’s hard for all of us. But it’s one of the things that stops us being idolatrous. Because the moment we say that there is violence in God, then we’re very quick at detecting the bits of violence which we think are right and god-ing ourselves up in those clothes and exercising that violence on other people. So the very, very first step to our being let off the blindness of our culture—and all human cultures, we’re all blind to some extent—the very first step is being let off from ever being able to sanctify our own violence. And once we stop being able to sanctify our own violence, then we can start to ask the questions about why we behave as we behave, what is really going on, without having a fake crutch on which to blame all this.

Dr. Alison: 13:20 The real God is not the crutch—the real God is the taker-away of the crutch. That, I think is what many people find baffling, is that the moment you understand that God is not part of violence, that God is not a crutch, and that God is the taker-away of the crutch, it means that, actually, God looks an awful lot less religious than most people expect and very often is seen in the collapse of religious things and

people who find themselves unable to go along with religious things precisely because there's too much violence in them. It's a very strange thing that we are given.

- Matthias: 13:52 Yes. You mention God being... you use the word "desacrilizing" a lot in your writing, and I read that as taking away the sacredness, taking away the—tell me if this resonates—the mysticism of the divine and putting it very much into human, earthy, fleshy ways of being, especially in those places where systems—whether that be church or whatever—are starting to crumble.
- Dr. Alison: 14:23 First thing: the one who took himself out of the numinous and into the fleshy was, of course, God Godself. That's what the Incarnation means: "I am not to be found on the top of Mount Horeb surrounded by flames and fire and trumpet and lighting; I am to be found on Golgotha, opening up heaven to all sisters and brothers who will allow themselves to be forgiven by this and to join with me in paradise." So, yes, the first movement into the fleshy was God's move out of the numinous and into the fraternal, if you like.
- Dr. Alison: 14:57 But I think that the point you're making is a very important one, and I'm very glad you raise it because there's a distinction which I think we ought to consider more often. It's the distinction between the sacred and the holy, because mostly we use the two words more or less indistinguishably. What I found really helpful about Girard—and he's not the only thinker to have used this distinction; I think Levinas used it also—is to keep the word "sacred" pretty much linked to that sort of irrational, numinous element that sometimes people refer to as mysticism, but which I think is really mythification rather than mysticism, and "holiness," which is what happens in people's lives when they find themselves put in touch with God, who is not one of the gods, who speaks more silently than the still, small voice rather than the earthquake, the wind, and the fire. There is a real mysticism there, and it's the real mysticism of people finding that they are called into being out of a place of weakness and without the need to trample upon anybody else, and without the need to be jealous or to grasp onto anything else, and so able to create fraternity in spaces which seemed very taut and tense.
- Dr. Alison: 16:08 So it's a question of how do you step out of the mystical—or mythicism, as it were—of the sacred, which, sometimes, can appear to be full of very divine-seeming things—and a great deal of fear and terror, let's remember, because the real thing that goes along with that, as we LGBT kids (or former kids) have known, is terror, abject terror—is the realization that none of that has anything at all to do with God, and all of that sounds completely hollow the moment the real thing turns up.

[break]

Matthias: 16:42 Have you heard something on Queerology that's made a big impact on your life? Do you now follow one of my guests because you've met them here? Because of the format of Queerology, you get to meet people in a way that lets you relate and connect. There's something uniquely personal and intimate about the conversations that happen here. If this is something you've experienced, then help me keep these conversations going by making a financial gift and becoming a Queerology Active Listener. You'll get access to the Active Listeners Facebook group right away: a place for all of us to continue these conversations throughout the week. All you need to do is jump over to patreon.com/matthiasroberts, choose your gift amount, and you'll be an active listener! It's really easy. That's patreon.com/matthiasroberts. I really look forward to meeting you in the Facebook group!

Matthias: 17:33 Okay. Let's get back to James.

[interview resumes]

Matthias: 17:38 You use the term "the intelligence of the victim." I would love you to unpack what that means a little bit. When you say "the real thing," is that what you're referring to?

Dr. Alison: 17:48 "The real thing," of course, is the presence of God and grace. An example I sometimes give is a rather wonderful film, whose name I always forget, with Steve Martin, who is being a fake revival preacher who goes through rube territory conducting these revivals in tents. He has a fake cripple who gets healed and fake people who start to get better, all of which brings in the money and keeps the show going. It's all very carefully choreographed, and he knows how to do it, and he and his crew are very professional. Then suddenly, in one of his meetings, the real thing happened. Someone who is not part of his team, who has not got an angle, who is not in any way rigged up for anything, is healed. And he has no idea what to do. It was actually a rather wonderful film because it shows how the turning up of the real thing doesn't confirm charlatany even though it looks like exactly the same thing. The turning up of the real thing completely blows apart charlatany. But it blows it up in a way that doesn't even leave the Steve Martin figure tormented. It's so much bigger than him that even his stupidity is just like, "Whoa... Out of my league, man!" I've always felt that film was rather a good image of the turning up of the real thing. When the real thing is there, the effects it produces are simply not commensurable with any normal human tit-for-tat. And that's what we expect for grace. That's why it's called grace—it's not part of the tit-for-tat. It's the

reverse of the tit-for-tat.

Dr. Alison: 19:22 But the question you asked about the intelligence of the victim is a slightly different one. That phrase I coined when thinking about Jesus and Jesus's public ministry—becoming aware that he knew what was going on. He knew where this would end. Not in just some magic sense of “I have divine foreknowledge because I am God,” but in the sense that he understood exactly how the human mechanisms worked, and therefore how easy it is to play to that. If anybody wants to make themselves a hero, you make yourself a victim. But that's playing the game. The intelligence of the victim is reconnoitering your way through the field like a very, very savvy set of military scouts or spies so as precisely not to set off the traps deliberately and not play their own game, but eventually to allow yourself to be taken, so that you are able to teach and make the point and give the people what you wanted to give them, but without being run by them.

Dr. Alison: 20:25 I think that's an enormous part of what all of our Christian lives are: learning how not to create fake victim status for ourselves. Learning how not to be professional survivors, but how to get beyond that so as to enable ourselves to work in quite difficult places without treading on the landmines or provoking the bear into reacting. Because it will—there's nothing easier than provoking the scapegoat mechanism—but that's not how you love other people. How you love other people is refusing to play that game, though not running away from it when you absolutely have to. So that, I think, is part of what I meant by “the intelligence of the victim,” but the image I have in mind was definitely that of the motion of reconnoitering so as to be able to know when to do things. I am fascinated in St. John's Gospel by the number of times that Jesus goes into dangerous places, then withdraws discreetly, and then he goes back, withdraws. It's only when he knows that it's the time that he goes and does.

Matthias: 21:25 It's interesting that you say that, because... I think a very natural thing—I do this so often—is walking into quote-unquote “dangerous situations,” or situations where we know people may react, and provoking, and pushing those buttons that you know so well are there—which feels good in the moment, but also it resurfaces all the resentment, all of the... everything.

Dr. Alison: 21:52 It's what I call “junk meaning.” It's the equivalent of junk food. It gives you a good shot, but ultimately it leaves you hungry. I agree, and I think that learning how not to do that, learning how to be able to give up button-pushing—which also means to be able not to react when your buttons are pushed—that is a work of grace. That is a

work of growth and prayer and relationships in time.

- Matthias: 22:15 Even as I hear you say that, there are parts of me that are like, “No! I don’t want to give that up”—not even being able to have an imagination of what that looks like and how giving that up might be better.
- Dr. Alison: 22:28 I know. I need an imaginary bad guy who I can fight against so I can be a hero. It’s awfully difficult to say, “Actually, the imaginary bad guy is just an imaginary bad guy. The person themselves in question may be bad, but they’re basically just another fart like me, so I might as well see them as my brother than some dinosaur.”
- Matthias: 22:51 Which, in some ways... we talked a little while ago about forgiveness. That kind of flips this notion of forgiveness on its head.
- Dr. Alison: 22:59 Yes. I think that that’s one of the things which I learned during this process and which really made sense to me, which is how to get out of forgiveness understood as emotional blackmail. The emotional blackmail version of forgiveness is, “You have behaved awfully to me, so I now need you to come groveling towards me, and when you do that, I will forgive you.” And that’s many of our assumptions as to how the relationship between God and sin works, and the discovery that actually, no, that’s exactly the reverse of how it works. God’s love for us is vastly prior to any kind of forgiveness that we may have. In fact, the way God’s forgiveness shows up in our lives is by us beginning to realize we’ve got something wrong. In other words, it’s the moment that your heart starts to break that you know you are forgiven. That’s very beautifully brought out in St. Luke’s Gospel where, you remember, the woman who washes Jesus’s hair: she’s clearly completely unselfconscious in all she’s doing, and she’s clearly completely loving, and Jesus says, “Her sins, I tell you, her many sins must have already been forgiven.” He recognizes that the person who has been forgiven is a person who has had their heart broken and is now free. They’ve been taken to a wider space.
- Dr. Alison: 24:17 So I think that the important thing is that God’s gift of forgiveness to us is not, if you like, a contingent part of some control mechanism, let alone some emotional blackmail mechanism. On the contrary, it’s God’s longing for us to have bigger hearts than we have, so looking for any excuse to break our hearts open a little bit. “Oh, my God, so that’s what I’ve been involved in. Now I see I needn’t be.” That’s what forgiveness looks like: God’s opening us up into Creation. Certainly that’s a fine... what I’ve just described to you is a fine medieval way of understanding this. Quite literally—that is Thomas Aquinas’s understanding. For him, contrition is the form of

forgiveness. What does it look like that forgiveness has arrived in someone's life? It looks like breaking apart. So it's not "Break your hearts so that I can forgive you," it's "My forgiveness erupts in your life as your breaking apart," which is such a completely different picture of who we are than the blackmail model that it's really well worth thinking about.

- Matthias: 25:21 In some ways, I hear that as forgiveness as realization instead of something we provoke.
- Dr. Alison: 25:28 Oh, yes. Forgiveness is prior to us. That's the whole point. Which is why, incidentally, the discovery that you're a sinner is a good thing. Someone who is able to relax about being a sinner is someone who is in the process of being forgiven. This is why to say that I am a sinner is not a form of self-laceration. It's a happy thing. "Oh, thank God. I'm a sinner, which means I'm on the way to being forgiven. So that's okay. I don't mind being a screw-up. I don't mind having got things wrong. The one who loves me at the banquet, the one who's inviting me, he knows all this and still wants me on-side." So, yes, when people use the language of "sinner" as if it were a necessary piece of pro-forma self-laceration before getting on with the real stuff, I say, "No, no, no, no, no. Being a sinner is a happy term."
- Dr. Alison: 26:14 I think that for us LGBT people, this is very often the case. We very often have a wide variety of irregular sexual and emotional experiences, and very often, it's easy for us to go along with the demands of Hardridge and say, "Well, that's okay. Just as long as you admit you're a sinner." Actually, that's exactly the reverse. The whole point of being able to relax about being a sinner is to realize that, actually, most of that stuff wasn't sin. Some of it, maybe, but the really important thing is that you're part of a learning process. Learning how to love, above all, which is the difficult thing.
- Matthias: 26:49 My mind is going in many, many, many, many different directions with that, so I'm having a hard time trying to find a thread in that. I think the word that comes to mind is almost a removal of... you mentioned self-laceration. My mind used the word "masochism." I think we've often—at least, I can speak for myself—I've often been taught that the religious life is a life that is almost masochism—"I am dirty, rotten," which you've been mentioning throughout this whole conversation. What you're saying is that... "No, no, no, no, no. All those things may be true, but they don't really matter."
- Dr. Alison: 27:36 Yeah. Christianity is not a purity cult. The only purity which matters in Christianity is of heart, and that really does matter. I think you're right. The ability to leave behind worrying about those kind of things—purity issues—and say, "Actually," languaging the word for

the trees here, “those are serving me as a pretext for not growing up.” That’s the real problem—when you become wedded to your love-hate relationship with the masochistic thing rather than being able to say, “D’you know, none of that really matters. What really matters is being able to love and get a life.” That’s going to have all sorts of opportunities for asceticism. There are going to be all sorts of moments where I’m going to have to be self-denying about this or that or the other, when I’m going to have to learn to be generous, when I’m going to have to learn to give up securities, et cetera, et cetera. In other words, there will be plenty of moments of genuinely carrying Christ’s cross in public that are not related to the rather self-prettifying purity hangups dressed up as carrying Christ’s cross.

- Dr. Alison: 28:39 I think it’s enormously important. The public testimony of being an honest and vulnerable person is inevitably going to put you in the way of danger. And hey—who would have it any other way? This is what Jesus said. Jesus said, “This is what will happen, and these are the consequences, and do it, and it’ll be fine. You will have brothers and sisters and mothers and daughters and all of that, and homes—and persecutions.” Okay. So we know that’s part of the package. This is part of the package of becoming a genuinely human person in the midst of a dehumanized world. It’s a frightening thing. It’s not frightening because God is frightening us—it’s frightening because other people become frightened.
- Matthias: 29:18 Which then leads to violence and outcasts. Is that correct?
- Dr. Alison: 29:23 At least to the threat of violence. The important thing is how not to fall straight into the trap of saying, “Ooh, there’s a nice bit of identity. I can grab a nice bit of victimry status just there. What fun.” Because then one is just the same as them, really.
- Matthias: 29:38 You say a lot—and this is a very interesting thought to me—I’m hearing glimpses of it in what you just said—this idea of Christianity being a religion of morals or right/wrong, this idea of this legal, “Here’s how you live a correct life, and here’s what will happen if you don’t.” That is nowhere to be found in what you’re saying.
- Dr. Alison: 30:00 Well, no. And I think that’s very strictly related to the understanding of the penal substitution theory. If you’ll allow me to explain why in almost a caricatural way: if you go along with the penal substitution theory, basically, it is saying that God created the world as good, there was a Fall, everything went wrong, someone needed to come and pay the price for all those things that had gone wrong—you get a list in the Old Testament of all the bad things—Jesus comes along, pays the price, so now, if you allow yourself to be covered by Jesus’s blood, be good. That’s it. Don’t you dare suggest that any of

the things in the list in the Old Testament that Jesus paid the price for wasn't really something wrong, because that would be to suggest that Jesus paid the wrong bill or that there was something wrong with what Jesus was doing. I hope you see that that understanding of Jesus's crucifixion manages to keep together a very strict moral list—basically, “the law,” understood in a bad sense—and Jesus's paying for it, and therefore we musn't question it. And therefore good behavior being “Now you must obey the law but,” as it were, “spontaneously.”

Dr. Alison: 31:13 Well, that doesn't appear to be what's going on if you understand it in the way which I've been attempting to follow and which turns out, incidentally, to be much, much closer to how many of the patristic-era fathers understood it: by going into this place of death for us, Jesus is opening up the deepest roots of what it is to be created such that, from now on, we discover as we go along together, and during this process of being forgiven, what really is God's logos—God's intention—the real desire that God has for Creation—of which he has made us co-participants. In other words, that there is a real learning exercise going on as to what genuinely is good for us rather than us having to say, “Well, we can't know what's good for us. We just have to obey this law, and now that the price has been paid, we'd better not criticize it.”

Dr. Alison: 32:09 Do you see how the two conceptions of Jesus's death have radically different consequences? It seems to me that the whole of the New Testament makes much more sense—specifically in terms of the giving of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit being with us to lead us into all truth—all those things—in terms of how God is trusting us to become not just servants but heirs, that's to say insiders, who are learning how to take control of the project. That's what all the New Testament language is about. “You are no longer servants, but friends.” It is a completely different picture. But I think that your point is, yeah, the other way does fatally make Christianity a religion of morals, however much teaching it says about “It's all about grace.” In practical psychological terms, it always turns out to be morals—and someone else's morals. In the paradigm which I am attempting to open out, and which is certainly no less conservative in terms of its reading of Scriptural texts—in fact, it's rather more conservative in many ways—says, “No, this is what it looks like when grace has shifted everything. And the Spirit is still shifting everything.”

Matthias: 33:18 “The Spirit which is still shifting everything...” I wonder, to wrap up a little bit: what would you say—in your experience, in your envisioning—what would you say the Spirit is shifting among this community of LGBTQ people of faith? What are we being invited

into?

Dr. Alison: 33:38 I travel the world a fair amount—or at least did before COVID made it impossible—so I’ve had the privilege of meeting people all over the place, and one of the things which I’ve noticed more and more is quite how often young gay and lesbian people of faith are really quite straightforward about who they are and are not asking for permission to participate. They know that who they are is fine. In the case of some of them, it’s taken a long time to get there, but there is a certain straightforwardness, and an ability to deal honestly with the issues, and a relief when they discover that Christianity is actually their friend rather than their enemy, that I find very encouraging. I’ve seen all sorts of groups of gay and lesbian believers meeting together where the straight people coming along are just delighted to be able to find a level of honesty, sharing, understanding, unselfconsciousness which is simply not usually available. So what I’m hoping is that even amongst apparent “none”s—and I understand that Washington state is one of the world’s great “none”s centers—that, actually, LGBT “none”s and LGBT believers are very, very close together in being able to discover rather new and vibrant ways of living Christianity. That’s just been the hints of what I’ve been seeing so far.

Dr. Alison: 35:15 Now what that means for the body as a whole, I don’t know, but in a sense, I think it’s one of the obvious things. It’s what we were always told, which is that those who find themselves being scapegoated initially are then able to stand up and bear witness to the others. I refer to this, at least amongst Catholics—it wouldn’t be a sensible term, perhaps, in the Protestant world—I refer to it as the church of the Confessors, Confessors being those people, in the Catholic understanding, who died because of their profession of faith rather than because they were martyred. They may have been martyred, but it was because of their professing their faith. It seems to me that one of the extraordinary things over the last 35 years in which apparently Heaven but certainly earth—God’s earthly representatives, both Catholic and Protestant—were doing their level best to exorcise gay people from any possibility of being honest or believers. That’s completely failed and crumbled. They have been revealed to be as fake and corrupt a bunch of leadership as has ever graced Christ’s church—and Lord, are they pretty good at producing corrupt leadership—and, amazingly, there have been people who have held onto faith in Christ in the midst of the great persecution. I think that that’s actually our treasure, and now we can share it. Not in a resentful way, saying, “You used to reject us, and now we’re going to run you,” but in saying, “Yeah, it’s real! Come in and join the party.”

Matthias: 36:36 What's your favorite way for people to discover your work?

Dr. Alison: 36:40 Oh—gosh. I have no idea at all. I have no idea at all. No, because these are not things you control at all or have any idea how they work. There are now ways of communication that are so different than they were 20, 30 years ago. But what I really like is when people say something like this: “You know, I’m not sure I understood exactly the words you were saying or exactly what I was reading, but I know that it was true, and it spoke to me.” In other words, that there is active communication that’s going on that is not just me. As a preacher, that is what I hope for, that people are picking up that they are being addressed by someone who is not me. That, for me, as a preacher, is my hope.

Matthias: 37:30 Well, thank you so much for joining me. This has been a pleasure.

Dr. Alison: 37:34 Well, my pleasure too! I hope that I will be able to come back to Tacoma before too long and—

Matthias: 37:39 Yes!

Dr. Alison: 37:40 —meet you and friends again. Please give them all my best wishes.

Matthias: 37:44 You can keep up with James and all of his new work over on his website, jamesalison.co.uk. That’s “Alison” with one L, not two. And you can pick up copies of Alison’s books wherever you buy books. One of my favorites, and a really good starting point, is *On Being Liked*. It’s this really beautiful exploration of, “We may know that we’re loved by God, but does God actually like us?” That’s *On Being Liked*.

Matthias: 38:14 Queerology is on Twitter and Instagram @queerologypod or you can tweet me directly @matthiasroberts.

Matthias: 38:21 Queerology stays on the air because of its Active Listeners. To find out how you can become an Active Listener, head over to patreon.com/matthiasroberts. Another really easy way to support the show is by leaving a rating and a review. You can do that right in your podcast app or head to matthiasroberts.com/review.

Matthias: 38:39 As always, I’d love to hear from you! If you have ideas of what you want to hear on the show or just want to say hi, reach out! I’ll get back to you.

Matthias: 38:45 Until next time, y’all: byeeee!