

St Phillip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Good Friday, 6 April 2012

Revd Rebecca Newland

*John 18.36 : Non-violence*

I am starting all of my the sermons over Easter in this same way—by setting the scene and putting the events of Holy Week into context. If you were at last night's service you would have already heard these opening paragraphs.

For Easter is like a drama — there is a plot, a story line, central characters and a stunning ending. The drama takes place in a particular time and place, but speaks of universal truths. As I set the scene and we hear the story again over Easter, perhaps you can discern where and how this story speaks to our world, countries and individuals. The questions we can ask over and over again are: who am I in this story? am I with Jesus or against him? am I with the powers and principalities or am I with the powerless? Do I 'get' what the Lord is saying or am I as lost and fallible as the first disciples?

Jesus rides into Jerusalem those many centuries ago into a particular socio-political world. He has come from Galilee, an outer region of Palestine, to the Holy City, the city of the temple and of government. As you all know, the Romans occupy Palestine. It had previously been occupied by the Greeks, and before that overrun by the Assyrians and Babylonians. This is a country that had known foreign rule and oppression for centuries. It was also a country with a tradition and story of covenantal grace and liberation long ago from Egypt. Palestine in the time of Christ was a hotbed of civil unrest, corruption and revolution. Many powers and groups vied for dominance.

Rome of course was the most obvious and most powerful group. Its legions were garrisoned in Jerusalem to be on hand to suppress any uprisings — which it did in the most viscous and thorough of ways. Crucifixion was the preferred option, a bloody, humiliating, painful death. Amongst the Jews there were a diverse range of groups trying to find ways and means to accommodate and get on with the occupiers, separate themselves from them, or throw them out.

The Pharisees wanted to reform the Jewish faith so that its rituals and rites of purity were available to all. Through this, they were building an alternative support base and centre of control. The Sadducees were the ruling elite, which held fast to the idea that only the priests and holy men could participate in Jewish rituals. The Essenes were an ascetic group who separated themselves from the rest of the population and tried to live the most holy and righteous lives possible. Running through this were various attempts to reinstate native kings from various lines of descent. Bandits were a thorn in the flesh of both occupier and peasant as they robbed travellers and villages and would side with various revolutionaries at different times.

At the centre of this is the temple cult, the site and place of symbolic and real power in the lives of the Jewish masses. It controlled the purity/impurity codes and laws and the debt repayment cycle.

Put all this, plus oppressive and unfair Roman and temple taxes, into the mix and you have a poor class who are indeed, 'lost and without a shepherd'. Marginalized, bound by religious rules and codes that are life draining, taxed to the brink of starvation and revolt, in debt to rich landholders; no wonder they crowded around prophets like John the Baptist and Jesus who seemed to offer a way out.

And Jesus did — but not in the way they and we expect. He didn't come with an army of angels. He didn't wield a sword. He didn't lobby the government. He embodied and taught

something quite different — the Kingdom of God that begins as a small seed and from the bottom up transforms the world.

Last night I spoke of how his example of loving service when he washed his disciples feet planted a seed, a seed that ultimately brings new life, fullness of life, to both ourselves and those we serve. When we serve as Jesus did, with that self-emptying humility we are truly free for when you lay everything down you have you have nothing left to loose. Truly in service is perfect freedom.

Today's ceremony takes us into the heart of his political and social action—his practice of non-violence.

In a world full of violence, oppression, unrest and revolution Jesus embodies something very, very different. Consider again if you will the violence of the ancient world. In fact consider the violence in our world. A stand out example of violence in ancient Rome was some eighty to a hundred years before the ministry of Jesus. Certain slaves were being trained as gladiators at Capua. The gladiatorial games were in themselves a religious celebration of violence. In Capua the slaves broke free and took refuge on the slopes of Vesuvius. As word of their rebellion spread, other runaway slaves joined them. Under the leadership of one of their number, Spartacus, the slaves marauded through southern Italy and defeated a succession of Roman armies. They were not finally overcome until 71 BC. The end was grisly, like so much in Roman history of this period. Crosses were erected along the Appian Way, the main road south from Rome, and 6,000 slaves are crucified. Six *thousand* slaves were crucified. The Romans took no prisoners or, if they did, they very quickly died on a cross in the arena.

In ancient Palestine, Rome was not the only player on the field of violence. Rebellion and revolution against Rome were grounded in violence. The religious purity and impurity code was itself a source of violence as people were expelled from the community. The temple rituals were inherently violent—violent at least to the thousands of animals slaughtered on their altars, both Jewish and Roman. René Girard, French linguist and philosopher, has said that ritual violence actually kept a lid on the human tendency to violence. Around the world today is example after example of state violence, revolution and brutal oppression.

Jesus faced and lived a violent and bloody end in a violent and bloody world but hear what he says to Pilate—and this is the King James version—“My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but my kingdom not from hence.” (18:36)

Out of all the verses in our reading from John's gospel I want to focus in on this one verse. In his answer to Pilate Jesus sets up an opposition between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of “this world.” This world is the world of empire and barbaric violence, the world of power and control where the poor are oppressed and injustice reigns. Paul uses a catchall phrase to describe the rulers of this world—the ‘powers and principalities’ who for Paul were also the powers of darkness and sin. In this world, Jesus is condemned to death by Roman Pilate, in Roman Judea, in the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire. But in this exchange with Pilate he never mentions Rome as such and he never addresses Pilate by name. He opposes something embodied in Rome but also far greater than Rome or any other empire. His words are timeless and applicable in all ages where darkness in its many forms seems to hold sway.

So often we hear this saying by Jesus quoted but the quote stops at the first seven words “My kingdom is not of this world.” When we stop there, “Not of this world” could mean: never on earth, but always in heaven; not now in present time, but off in imminent or distant future; not a matter of the exterior world, but of the interior life alone. Jesus spoiled all those possible misinterpretations by continuing with this: “If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered” up to execution. He is saying, “Your soldiers

hold me, Pilate, but my companions will not attack you even to save me from death. Your Roman Empire, Pilate, is based on the injustice of violence, but my divine kingdom is based on the justice of non-violence.”

Dominic Crossan has called Pilate the most important interpreter of Jesus in the entire New Testament. Why? Because Pilate clearly recognized the difference between Barabbas and Jesus. Barabbas was a violent revolutionary so, as Mark 15:7 puts it, “Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.” Pilate arrested him along with those of his followers he could capture. But Jesus was a non-violent revolutionary, so Pilate made no attempt to round up his companions.

Both Barabbas and Jesus opposed Roman injustice in the Jewish homeland but Pilate knew exactly and correctly how to weigh up their divergent oppositions. For Pilate Jesus is simply not a threat in the same way that Barabbas is.

Jesus’ response to Pilate did not represent a speaking of truth to power. It was one powerful truth confronting another. It was the powerful truth of non-violent justice confronting the powerful truth of violent injustice. In Pilate and Jesus the two worlds come face to face. True to their worlds, one unjustly condemns an innocent man, the other dies on a cross.

Mahatma Gandhi, who was profoundly influenced by Jesus, had this to say about non-violence: “Non-violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evildoer, but it means the pitting of one’s whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honour, his religion, his soul and lay the foundation for that empire’s fall or its regeneration.” He went on to say, “even a little of true nonviolence acts in a silent, subtle, unseen way and leavens the whole society.”

And hear the words of Martin Luther King Jr: “We had to make it clear that nonviolent resistance is not a method of cowardice. It does resist. It is not a method of stagnant passivity and deadening complacency. The nonviolent resister is just as opposed to the evil that he is standing against as the violent resister but he resists without violence.”

The difficulty of course is that the nonviolent resister must be prepared to lose their life. Gandhi and Luther did know that and lost their life, lone assassins opposed to their decisions and teachings gunned them down. Two million people attended Gandhi’s funeral procession; one hundred thousand people joined King’s. Jesus goes to the cross alone, betrayed by all, tortured and brutally murdered by the state. In John’s account the only ones left to bury Jesus are two frightened men and one frightened woman.

The astonishing thing is that this non-violent person, who is murdered and buried, is the incarnated Son of God. It is the second person of the Trinity, God’s very self, who dies on a cross. How on earth the Christian faith could end up being militant, turning the cross upside down, sharpening the end and turning it into a sword, is quite frankly beyond me, but what the story of a non-violent God in Christ Jesus does is show us that the only violent beings in this story are human beings. We are the violent ones and we will co-opt anything, anyone, any belief system to justify our actions.

It is hard to see how non-violence can be any sort of answer in the world in which we live and yet, like loving service, non-violence is a seed that brings a new perspective, new life and new hope. We know the death of Jesus on Good Friday and the astonishing events of the following Sunday did indeed bring new life in many ways. In fact it birthed a radically new pathway. It brought freedom from sin and darkness for those who embrace the way. Those who follow it find a truth and power greater than any power or principality. Their identity, their being, is grounded in the one who so loved them and all creation that nothing can ever bind them again.

One man, one death. Much, much, much fruit.