

Touchstone Two: Christ unveils violence

Numbers 25: 1-13

John 11:45-53

Sin and violence

In the first touchstone we talked about the goodness of God who reveals God's very being as Christlike, in whom there is no Christlikeness at all. We don't figure this out by ourselves, either through philosophical reasoning or even by having read the words of the Bible. The revelation of this Word (Jesus) comes as an apocalypse – an unveiling – a parting of the veil - and as an invitation to a freely chosen response. In Christ we see that's God's relationship with us is one of unconditional covenant and this covenant is irrevocable from God's side – just like a parent's love for a child.

This all sounds like very good news, and it is. So why are we in such a terrible pickle when it comes to the way we often treat each other – whether that be in the atrocities of genocide through to the machinations of organizational relationships? Why do we need God to break through to us? Why can't we just figure it out for ourselves? To try to answer these questions, we need to take a journey into the dark side of the human condition and try to track violence down to the source. ¹

A way into this could be to do a little imaginative exercise. Imagine that you had lived your entire life in a world constructed by particular rules of engagement which limited your freedom – but you were completely unaware that such rules existed. You just took them for granted. A movie which brilliantly explores this is 'The Matrix'. The world of the Matrix is the world of everyday perception, which we take for granted – which we take to be *real*. But it turns out that it is actually a computer simulated reality. It is impossible to break out of the Matrix because people do not even know they are in it. For people to do be freed, there needs to be an intervention into the Matrix from an outside source, in the form of an outsider putting a virus into the computer program – what computer programmers call a back-door entry. It is through such an intervention that the main character, Neo, learns that there is a world outside The Matrix.

The illusions, lies, deceptions and life-limiting forces of The Matrix is a metaphor for what, in theological language, is called 'Sin' (with a capital 'S'). I'm not talking here about sins (as in naughty behaviors), but the programming of the system itself. St Paul talks about Sin as a kind of milieu of death characterized by powerful forces which are frequently invisible to us but which orient us towards violence. Paul uses the colorful language of the ancient world – he says, "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12). In the modern language we might talk about the violent dynamics of human systems (which I called mimetic rivalry) as well as the complex forces of the unconscious. In both cases, this milieu is more or less *unconscious* to us.² It is precisely because we are all subject to these powerful unconscious (spiritual) forces that even our thinking of God is sufficiently distorted that God ultimately needs to break into the Matrix of disordered violent desires.

Despite God being good and calling us to life, we know that we don't always see ourselves and others as God does. We know that it can be really difficult to love some people. Despite our best intentions we know we can be cruel, violent and deceitful. Despite our good desires, our actions do not follow. With great self-insight, As St Paul summaries it like this:

¹ During the Covid pandemic in Australia, where an elimination strategy was largely adopted, one of the favourite terms of the health authorities was 'we need to run this virus to ground'. That is what we are going to do here in relation to Violence.

² When Jesus said on the cross, 'Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34) he was pointing directly to aspects of what we would call the personal (psychological) and collective (social) 'unconscious'

Romans 7:19ff For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.

The sources of violence

Why does human desire, which is basically positive and through which we can, for example, desire God, become so mixed up and lead to violence? The most extreme kind of violence is murder and it shows up very early in the Hebrew Scriptures in the story of Cain murdering his brother Abel (Genesis 4). In the story, The Lord warns Cain, ‘Sin is lurking at the door; its *desire* is for you, but you must master it’. One of our best modern guides to the nature of distorted desire is the brilliant French-American thinker Rene Girard. Rene Girard was originally an Atheist but was eventually converted to Christ through his contemplation of the Jewish and Christian scriptures and the story of Jesus in particular.³

Rene Girard points out that humans are, by nature, imitative —which means we ‘copy’ each other. For example, at the simplest level we note that babies and infants imitate their parents. Imitation is the way we learn language. I recall the mild embarrassment, mixed with admiration, I felt when one of my children, barely two years of age, innocently yelled out a particularly colorful swear word in our local supermarket. Clearly she had been conscientiously imitating one of her parents. We are also enculturated into our belief systems through imitating beliefs about what is ‘right and wrong’ - the way we ought to behave with others. Much of this can be a good thing where the patterns we are imitating are generally healthy and loving.

If we go deeper we note that we not only copy each other’s *behaviors and beliefs* but humans copy each other’s *desires*. One example is a phenomena which all parents will recognize. If there are two toddlers sitting in a room, there may be a particular toy sitting on the floor which is of no particular interest to either child. However as soon as one child reaches for the toy, it suddenly becomes an object of intense fascination to the other child. Very quickly we can have escalating conflict as the second child ‘imitates’ the desire of the first child.

The same principle operates through to adulthood. Advertising – particularly visual advertising – works because of mimetic desire. It is demonstrably proven that if an advertisement shows an image of an attractive person desiring a particular product, that our desire (and purchasing behavior) towards that product will be activated. Girard postulated *that we learn what to desire from imitating the desire of others*. He referred to this as ‘mimetic desire’...mimetic meaning the ‘imitation of desire’. The bible calls it ‘envy’ or ‘coveting’.⁴ We typically believe that what we desire is a personal choice but it turns out that we have less choice than we thought. Desire is often, if not largely, *caught* from other people. Like catching a virus, desire is contagious.

It’s even more likely that mimetic desire will get activated on a broad scale when that society is highly interconnected as it is through social media. Social media provides a mechanism by which contagious mimetic desire spreads like a wild fire. This has given rise to the phenomenon of ‘social influencers’ - often younger people who have tens of thousands of social media ‘friends/followers’. These social influencers become very valuable to marketing people.

So what does this have to do with violence? When my desire for what another person desires is activated in the presence of scarcity (i.e. 2 toddlers but only one toy), then my neighbor is likely to become my *rival*. One of the interesting and dangerous aspects of mimetic desire is that once a movement of mimetic desire is activated in a crowd it is highly contagious. It doesn’t take long before the persons involved have forgotten the original object of our shared desire and we are just imitating each other’s competitive emotions. These are some examples of mimetic rivalry which we may have observed in everyday life:

³ Girard’s work primarily focused on western literature and culture. In his later years he started to explore and notice connections between his theories of human desire and the literature of other cultures such as India. Asian scholars of Girard are now deepening that work].

⁴ Deuteronomy 5:21 for a primary restriction on coveting.

- The phenomenon of the Christmas or New Year's Day sales where people line up early outside the doors of department stores or people overload computer booking systems in an attempt to get tickets to a concert. Mimetic desire leads to rivalry, and depending on the stakes, escalating anxiety, conflict and violence.
- In a media interview with a politician close to an election, an interviewer asks a question about policy but the only response the politician gives is to attack the opposition, often in very personal terms. Policy itself, is buried under the weight of mimetic attack on one's political enemies, in which the shared object of desire is power. To win power I need to take down my rivals.
- Just last week when a suicide bomber blew themselves up in Afghanistan, President Biden in an instant threw out his Christian convictions and reverted to mimetic violence – 'we will not forgive – we will hunt them down and make them pay'.

These are big examples, but if we pay attention we will discover we are all prone to this. It happened to me just this week. Someone thwarted my desire and I found myself spending a fair bit of time fantasizing and planning about how I could get my own way. I realized that this person had become my rival. I felt an intense desire to *win*.

Girard noticed how mimetic rivalry is a key theme in the scriptures. We have already touched on Adam and Even in the Garden and the story of Cain and Abel. But there are many others. We might recall the disciples arguing about who would be greatest in the Kingdom of God (Luke 22:24); the jealousy of the religious leaders towards Jesus (Matthew 26:4); the hostility of Saul towards the early Christian communities (Acts 8:1; 1 Cor.15:9).⁵

Peace which the world tries to give

All societies need mechanisms for limiting the potential for violence which can arise from mimetic desire and rivalry. The way in which the challenges of mimetic rivalry have been dealt with in very ancient cultures and our own has evolved over time. Girard pointed out that when there is escalating anxiety in a community that there needs to be a circuit breaker to an escalation of violence which could become 'all against all'. If enemies can find a third party to blame for their conflict, then they can achieve (temporary) peace, or ward off a plague, by uniting against a common enemy. Girard called this third party the scapegoat – and it could be an individual or an entire group of people (like Jews, or Boat-people, or Anti-Vaxers or Vaxers – just pick your preferred enemy). The selection of the scapegoat is, by definition, irrational and arbitrary. As long as the scapegoat is sufficiently 'different' to us to be cast as the evil-other. Driving out (including killing) a scapegoat restores peace because there is one thing that the warring parties can agree on – it's the scapegoat's fault! ⁶ But here is the clincher. For scapegoating to work, a society needs to be absolutely clear in its own mind that the scapegoat is guilty, evil or diseased. We do this by unconsciously create a justifying story (or myth) about how truly wicked the other person, or group, is.⁷ The Phineas story is a good example of just such a story. Phineas runs his spear through a copulating couple and the plague is stopped and Phineas is held up

⁵ Mimetic Rivalry, competition and violence can be exacerbated when deep seated survival and belonging needs to get activated. Jesus wrestled with precisely such needs in the desert temptations as he wrestled with desires to be relevant (turning stones into bread); to be powerful (political power over kingdoms); and to be impressive (throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple and be carried safely down by angels).

⁶ Girard admits that he is not an absolute pacifist and that not all violence is sacred violence. Some limited violence to restrain an act of aggression towards me is not the same as adopting a generalized hostility towards another 'group' as 'enemy'. And yet Girard points out that the latter can so easily still be 'justified' by appeal to the former.

⁷ Girard uses the word 'myth' in a very distinctive way. Myth, for Girard, is a story that hides a murder that has brought cohesion to a community.

as the archetypal man of religious zeal – from which Saul of Tarsus most likely took his inspiration as he persecuted the early church.⁸

Finally Jesus himself falls foul of the scapegoating mechanism. As the High Priest summarized it:

You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.(John 11:50)

and which Jesus recognized when he said,

Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God (John 16:2)⁹

Jesus pre-eminently reveals (unveils) sacred violence by willingly becoming the victim of the scapegoating instincts of both church and state.

Bigger than we think – swimming in a sea of disordered desire

I wonder if these reflections help us to see how Sin and Violence are far bigger and more deeply entrenched in ourselves and in our communities that we might have imagined. Sin is not just about a teenager hunting down the hidden grog in the house, but the fact that there is already a rivalrous desire between teenager and parent.

Most of the time the individual choices we make, even when we are unconsciously just imitating the desire of others, are relatively innocuous – like buying one brand of coffee over another. However, at the scale of an entire economic system we are, as St Paul said, ‘captives’. As a whole society we are all enmeshed in the matrix of mimetic rivalry, being carried along on a collective express train which has a whole raft of unintended consequences, such as addiction, mental illness, violence and environmental destruction).

The existence and trajectory of this express train transcends the morally neutral choices about whether I buy one type of coffee over another. On the express train we are in captivity – trapped – enslaved. St Paul referred to our struggle with forces which seem so much greater than ourselves:

To survive as humans, we need to take Sin and violence seriously. Sin can be thought of as radical and destructive autonomy in which we become rivals of each other. Linguistically Sin says, “I/we exist independently of you. I need to win over you. I can use you (turn you into an object) to get my own needs met. You are disposable to me. You are not human”. Sin whispers in Cain’s ear, ‘you don’t need your brother - you would be better off without him’. Sin whispers in the ear of tribal leaders everywhere, ‘utterly destroy them - hunt them down and kill them’. But as Paul said in his metaphor of the human body, we cannot say of anyone, “I have no need of you” (1 Corinthians 12).

How does God save us from this mess? How does God lift us out of this pit and bring us into communion with God’s self and each other when we are stuck in The Matrix? Stay tuned for the next exciting episode – Touchstone 3.

⁸ Galatians 1:14

⁹ Luke 23:12 The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.