

Touchstone 4: Becoming human – the mind of Christ

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Galatians 5:22-26

Over the last few weeks I've been trying to show that the Gospel of Christ is actually a Gospel of Peace.

In Touchstone One I said that the starting point for who God is, is....God is Christlike in whom there is no unChristlikeness at all.

In Touchstone Two : I talked about how Jesus unveils (reveals/illuminates) the nature of Sin as it shows up as mimetic (imitative) rivalry, rivalry and scapegoating violence. I talked about how this is such a problem for us because it is so frequently invisible to us. It's like we are trapped in a matrix of illusion (we used the analogy of the movie, The Matrix). We think our desire is our own but it turns out that our desire is largely caught from other people. And we think when we get into a scapegoating blame game that the other person is objectively guilty or evil – but that we may (often are) just creating a justifying story for our own violence.

In Touchstone Three: I talked about how God can only free us from the matrix by getting in under our radar through the divine logic (Logos) of death and resurrection of Jesus – a love which is humble, non-grasping, non-retaliatory and forgiving. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit we are *grafted onto* the death and resurrection of Jesus and we are raised into a new kind of existence (what Paul calls The New Creation) which is not governed by the rules of our violence. The Spirit of God in us is making us into human beings, which means we are being made into the image and pattern of Christ's life. I finished last week by wondering what it means to be made into human beings.

Have we ever wondered what it means to be a human being?

There is a fascinating verse in Genesis 1:26 where God says, 'let us make a human'.

The Orthodox scholar John Behr points out that God's project of making a human reaches its culmination in Jesus's last words on the cross, 'It is finished' (John 19:30). As Pilate so ironically and truthfully declared to the crowd, 'behold the anthropos (human)' (John 19:5). Jesus, the completed human, is human precisely because he expresses the full depth of God's love for the cosmos in his voluntarily chosen self-giving (John 3:16).

It is in this particular way – fully immersing himself in the depths of the worst that humans can do to God, the brutality of and unjust death on a cross, that God reveals his 'glory' as absolute love.

John Behr points out how Jesus destroys fear of death by turning death into a doorway to life. John Behr gives quite a dramatic illustration of this in a story of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, in the second century. Ignatius was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John (the author of the fourth gospel) so we are hearing very early Christian testimony – within a two-generation memory of Jesus himself. Ignatius wrote a letter to the Romans was written while he was being marched to Rome to be martyred. Ignatius appeals to the Christians in Rome not to save him from his impending death because through his voluntarily chosen nonviolent witness to Christ he will be born into his true life. For St Ignatius, to be born into the life of God, through his nonviolent testimony to the love of Christ, was to *become a human being*. As Ignatius said in his letter to the Christians in Rome while we was being carried off to his certain death:

“I have no use for the delights of this world and all its kingdoms. I would prefer dying in Jesus Christ to ruling over all the earth. I seek him who died for us; I desire him who rose for our sake. I am about to be born again. Understand me, my brothers; do not hinder me from coming to life [by dying], do not wish me to die [by remaining in this world]. I desire to belong to God, not to the world. Do not seduce me with perishable things. Let me see the pure light; when I am there, I shall be truly a man at last. Allow me to imitate the sufferings of my God”.¹

When I was a theological student in the early 1990s I met a Uniting Church Minister, Neville Watson, who told me about his travels with a group of peace-makers into Iraq during the first Gulf War. The purpose of this peace team was to express solidarity with Iraqi people during the intensive bombing of Baghdad and put their own lives at risk alongside their fellow humans inspired by the example of Jesus. Neville taught me about the courage required by nonviolence where a person must be willing to die but not to kill.

Another example was brought to light more recently in the movie, ‘Hacksaw Ridge’. It tells the story of nonviolence in war by a young Christian named Desmond Doss who went to war as a Medico because he was a conscientious objector to bearing arms. He was the only non-combatant to win the Congressional Medal of Honor after rescuing dozens of wounded men from the battlefield.

Stanley Hauerwas, who wrote a book called ‘The Peaceable Kingdom’² said,

“[Jesus] proclaims that the kingdom is present insofar as his life reveals the effective power of God to create a transformed people capable of living peacefully in a violent world”

Whenever we make a conscious attempt to live and lead nonviolently we are making an act of trust in which there is no certainty of the outcome in the sense of whether it will ‘work’. We might still suffer violence from the other person. We might not achieve the kind of idea peace we hope for. In the synoptic gospels Jesus walks into the place of death trusting his heavenly Father in the midst of experiencing extreme violence and brutality. Yet Jesus does this because it is what he feels love is calling him to. This therefore has its own inherent value. This is the mindset we need to bring into our nonviolent living and leadership. It has its own inherent integrity as an act of love – as an expression of the mind of Christ.

Jesus tries to teach all this to an utterly baffled Nicodemus when Jesus says to him, ‘you have to be born again’. Nicodemus’s concrete mind has trouble comprehending this. Hopefully our physical death through which we will live with God in a new way will, for most of us, be somewhat off. In the meantime, we die symbolically when we turn to God.

As I mentioned last week in relation to contemplative prayer, when we say our prayer word in meditation it is a kind of mini-death to the relentless demands of the ego. When we are baptised we talk about a person being drowned. When we say, ‘thy kingdom come’, we are saying, ‘my kingdom go’. Can we see the pattern in all this? This is the Spirit of God grafting us onto the death of Jesus. Not to be morbid – quite the contrary – but to be born into life. To become human. And the fruits of this are, as St Paul says, love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.³

¹ Ignatius of Antioch's Letter to the Romans.

https://www.orderofstignatius.org/files/Letters/Ignatius_to_Romans.pdf

² Hauerwas, The Peaceable Kingdom, 129

³ Galatians 5:22-23

In an earlier reflection (Touchstone two) I talked about the movie, The Matrix. The main character, Neo, is starting to realise that he is existing within a world that he does not quite comprehend. He is starting to suspect there is something more but he doesn't know what it is. A character called Morpheus comes to Neo and asks if Neo wants to dive further into the rabbit hole of enquiry and see where it leads. Morpheus holds out a pill in each hand – a red pill and a blue pill. He says to Neo:

“there is no turning back, you take the blue pill the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe in whatever you want to believe; you take the red pill you stay in wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember....all I am offering is the truth, nothing more”.

Spoiler alert coming.....when Neo takes the red pill, he is flushed out of the matrix in one of the best visual illustrations of baptism ever devised by contemporary cinema. By the way, the word Matrix is derived from the Latin meaning 'womb'. Neo has just been born into reality – it's an astoundingly powerful analogy for baptism. This is death to Neo's old life. It doesn't make Neo's life easier. In many ways his life just got a whole lot harder. But now he is truly alive. Neo is reborn (by the way, Neo means 'new').

To say, with St Paul, that we have 'died with Christ'⁴ means that Sin (rivalrous combative relationships; ego-centeredness; individualism; scapegoating) is no longer the central logic by which we live our lives. All these things are being nonviolently absorbed by God and healed as we orient our lives to the new logic (Logos) of God in whom we are now living and who is living in us.

To be part of the 'New Creation' is to participate in the life of God now in advance of our physical death and to appropriate aspects of resurrection life now. St Paul says that we are given a new mind – the mind of Christ. Through our voluntarily chosen yes to the Spirit, peace and joy is fanned into life within us. As Brother Roger of Taizé reflects:

'Risen Christ, when we have the simple desire to welcome your life, little by little a flame is kindled in the depths of our being. Fueled by the Holy Spirit, it may be quite faint at first, but it keeps on burning. And when we realize that you love us, the trust of faith becomes our own song'.

To summarise, then, peace is central to the Gospel and the Gospel of Peace is the foundation of the church. Peace is not just a thing we do. Peace is central...

- to the identity of the church – who we are – As Paul says, 'we ARE the body of Christ', therefore we are a people shaped like Jesus who is the Prince of Peace
- to our reason for existence – we are a people who practice peace

And yet, what are we to do with all the violence in the Bible? What are we to do with passages in the Bible which apparently say that God orders genocides? What about the notion that a loving God will condemn some people to everlasting suffering in hell? Is it possible for God to be a pathological murderer in one moment and the prince of peace in the next? To navigate this territory will require us to think about how we read, as much as what we read, in the Bible. And that will be the focus of the next exciting instalment. Stay tuned.

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⁴ 2 Timothy 2:11