

Touchstone 3: Christ delivers from Sin, Violence and Death

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 12:38-40

In Touchstone One focused on the statement by Bishop Michael Ramsey that ‘God is Christlike in whom there is no unChristlikeness at all’. That is Christ is the definitive revelation of God. If we want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. We said that this revelation comes as an unearned gift which we don’t figure out for ourselves. This gift is also an invitation from God to freely chosen relationship with God.

In Touchstone Two we explored how the gospel of peace not only unveils the character of God as love, but also illuminates the nature of Sin and particularly how Sin plays out in mimetic (imitative) rivalry, violence and scapegoating. The scholar, Rene Girard, argued that a key way that societies limit violence (establish a ‘peace’ of sorts) is through the mechanism of scapegoating. This is the kind of peace-making which resulted in Jesus’s crucifixion. The scapegoating mechanism binds a community together against a particular individual or group who is different to us. Scapegoating shifts the dynamic from ‘all against all’ (fighting each other) to ‘all against one’, thereby uniting us against a common enemy. In order to do this, we need to create a justifying story that the victim is guilty, evil and perhaps even deserving death.

Left to our own devices our lives are enmeshed in these dynamics. We don’t realize that we are part of this violent system. If we did we might choose not to participate in it. Therefore we are stuck in a matrix of disordered desire – what Rene Girard called, ‘mimetic rivalry’. Being trapped in the disordered logic of violence we can’t even see the problem we are in unless God breaks through to us. Why? Because we are busy with using a god of our own creation to justify our own violence towards others. We are stuck in a self-justifying cycle.

Christ’s participation in the world

How is God going to break us out of the Matrix in order to help us find our right minds and enter into freely chosen relationship? The Christlike God cannot combat the violent logic of our Sin and Violence (our myths of redemptive violence) with a violent logic of God’s own. As Martin Luther King put it, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that”¹

To save us, God must use a different kind of logic (Logos) to the human logic of rivalry and scapegoating. This alternative logic involves God lovingly and fully entering *into* our human condition. As an analogy, I invite us to imagine a destructive conflict situation in which people are yelling and screaming at each other – completely enmeshed in a battle of wills. Regrettably for some people they might only need to think back to last Christmas when the whole family got together. They cannot find their way out. They are trapped in conflict.

Now imagine Jesus entering into this situation and quietly standing in the midst of it. Because Jesus enters into the space of conflict as a calm presence, not drawn into the mimetic frenzy, he begins by his very presence to change the dynamic. At one level, Jesus’s presence creates a different model as he calmly holds the tension in the room, loving each person equally rather than becoming part of the

¹ ML King Strength to Love, 37.

competitive vortex. Jesus is not bound into our dynamics of vengeance and punishment and lovingly embodies forgiveness for everyone in the room.

But there is more to the work of Christ than being a model, as important as that is. Imagine the conflict-ridden group turning on Jesus and venting their anger on him instead of each other and killing him. If Jesus is only a man, then all we have witnessed is another victim of human violence – a very good model of peace but also just another human scapegoat. People could then start fighting each other about the killing of Jesus ('you killed our guy''you're entirely responsible'. Then they might set up a shrine to their crucified God and start defending it with artillery). But Jesus does not just die as another human victim. As God, Jesus is a bit like one of those cables which joins the lighting rod on the top of the cathedral to the ground. He carries the violence of human wrath into the ground of his death. By being raised as the forgiving victim, God reveals God's unconquerable life – a life which transcends our rivalries and will have no part in their death-dealing. Jesus reveals that our death-dealing is a waste of time and energy. It cannot create true or lasting peace.

Jesus, as the forgiving victim offers the possibility of ending the mimetic pattern of making victims. But more than that....through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God is in the process of creating a community of people who will be grafted ONTO this same pattern of non-retaliatory love, and in doing so will spread like a virus of peace unleashed into the world.

But wait....there is more..... through the resurrection, Christ is making visible a new sphere of existence which Paul called, 'The New Creation'. Because the New Creation is "life in God" it is also a state of existence untouched by Sin, violence and death. Through the gift of the Spirit we are being invited to participate in that new creation NOW.

The prophet Isaiah got a glimpse of this when he said, "he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces"²

Pauline Scholar, Douglas Campbell, captures the close connection between God's loving faithfulness and God's primary action as 'deliverer' by showing how "Dikaiosune" (the Greek word traditionally translated as either 'justice' (NIV) or 'righteousness' (NRSV)), is best understood as 'deliverance'. God can be said to be 'righteous' and 'just' precisely because God faithfully 'delivers' God's people from oppression (Sin, rivalry, violence) through the faith (faithfulness) of Christ³ into resurrection life.⁴

God's deliverance is not, in the first instance, about whether I as an individual go to some blissful place called heaven after death. It is about God dealing with evil, sin and death and remaking humanity through God's Spirit in this present moment. God is saving the human species. Paul summarized this when he wrote, "As in Adam *all* die, so in Christ shall *all* be made alive!"⁵(Adam here represents the human condition bound up in the matrix of violence). The point is not about whether *our* goodness can get us to God. It's about God's goodness *coming to us*. God doesn't save us because we are good(faithful). God saves us because *God* is good(faithful).

Earlier I posed the question about how God can get us out of the violent vortex of the Matrix when we can't see the nature of the problem. God can only do this, and does this in Christ, by not becoming part of the problem but transforming the problem with a new kind of logic – the logic of

² Isaiah 25:8. see also Rev. 21:4

³ Often translated as faith 'in Christ', which has the unfortunate effect of suggestion that our deliverance is happening through our work rather than Christ's work.

⁴ Romans 3:26 Habakkuk 2:4.

⁵ 1 Cor. 15:22

nonviolent love. Whereas mimetic desire *grasps* after what we want and heaven help anyone who gets in the way (remember the image I used of two toddlers and one toy fire truck)...the logic of Christlike love is open handedness. Adam and Eve *grasp* for the forbidden fruit. Christ lets go of grasping – opening wide his hands on the cross. Whereas we *grasp* after becoming like God, Christ empties himself and takes the form of a servant.

But how does this help *us*? How does a crucified Jew, who lived 2000 years ago, liberate us, now, from Sin, death and violence? In short, through the sending of the Holy Spirit! The Spirit of God connects us to the God who was, is and always will be the crucified and risen one and thereby liberates us. ⁶

St Paul said,

(Galatians 4:6) because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father”

Jesus’s prayer to his Abba (Father), ‘thy will be done[’, becomes our prayer through the Spirit. This kenotic, strong non- retaliatory love is the virus which God has put into the Matrix of human violence. God has uses a secret back door to get past our grasping defenses by turning death itself into a doorway to life. God’s Spirit is like a mustard seed....a smelly piece of yeast.....a treasure hidden in a field....

Because, through the Spirit, we are ‘*in-Christ*’⁷ there is a sense in which our lives have been spiritually grafted *onto* the death and resurrection of Jesus so that his death and resurrection has become our own.

To say that we have ‘died to Sin’ means that Sin (rivalrous relationships; ego-centeredness; individualism) is no longer the central logic by which we live our lives. Our Sin is being nonviolently absorbed by God and we are being transformed as our lives are formed by 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 begin to appropriate resurrection life *now*.

Insight into what it means to participate *in Christ* may be provided by revisiting St Paul’s experience of meeting Christ. Everything changed for Paul with the dramatic apocalyptic inbreaking/unveiling of Christ on the Damascus Rd. All Paul’s writing is, in some shape or form, an attempt to articulate what happened in that encounter where Jesus says, ‘why are you [*in persecuting my followers*] persecuting me?’⁸ Paul is not made into a Christian. He is made into a nonviolent Jew, transformed from a man of violent religious zeal (modelled on Phineas who we mentioned last week) to a man of peace.

At a very practical level, saying ‘yes’ to the pattern of Christ’s life happens when we enter into contemplative prayer. When we gently say our prayer word, we are saying ‘yes’ to Jesus and ‘no’ to all the other rivalrous fantasies of our ego. It is a kind of dying in the sense of submitting our ego to a greater love and inviting God to occupy us (the ego fights it with every fiber).

⁶ This requires us to think flexibly about the nature of time. Time is a ‘created’ property of the universe to which God is not ultimately subject. God’s kenotic (self-emptying) love is seen, from our perspective of history, as a specific moment in time (first century Jerusalem). But from God’s perspective, the cross represents God’s eternal (outside time) nature as love.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:17

⁸ Acts 22:7

Voluntarily entering into the worst of what we can throw at God (crucifixion) is the way God chooses to love the world, and save the world, from beginning to end. The death and resurrection of Christ is not something God needed to introduce as an afterthought to mop up our messes but is the revelation of God's eternal nature....the 'lamb slain from the foundation of the world'. God, in Christ, has always been bearing the pain of the world.⁹

The cross and resurrection is the revelation of the way God suffers the world *in the very act of creating it*....just like an artist suffers in the process of creating a great piece of art. And we are the ones being painted. Through being grafted onto the death and resurrection life of God we are gradually being made into human beings.

I wonder what that means. What does it mean to be made into a human being?

Stay tuned for the next exciting installment.

⁹⁹ To get our head around this requires flexibility about the nature of time. God transcends space and time and can therefore be equally present to every moment of space and time from the perspective of our experience of space and time.