

Touchstone One: The Christlike God

Ephesians 1:1-14

John 1:1-5

Over the last couple of weeks a few people have expressed some interest in what I have been writing in my book. So I have decided to offer a series of reflections based on some of the key themes. I am hoping this might be somewhat useful to you, as it certainly will be for me, as a try to take some big ideas and distill them out into bite sized chunks. The title of the book at this stage is ‘Practicing Peace’. The book is divided into sections about theology, contemplation and action. In this five-part series I’m going to focus on the theology bit, because we are already engaged in contemplative prayer and what I will try to do, where I can is to connect the theology to our practice of prayer.

By way of background, the topic of violence and peace has been a very long-standing interest of mine – ever since I was a fulltime theology student 30 years ago. The first catalyst was being disturbed by the amount of violence in the Bible and how to interpret that. The second catalyst was confronting my own inner violence which became particularly apparent to me as a stressed-out young parish priest, trying to manage the complexities of parish ministry and often taking out that stress out on others. In both cases, I found there was this disjunct between what the Christian tradition proclaimed about Jesus as the Prince of Peace, and the way Christians often behaved.¹ There is now clear research evidence that proclaiming Christ does not necessarily mean that we are peaceful people and I am very interested in what is going on there.

In my book I argue that Christians practice peace not because it’s a good thing to do but because peace lies right at the very heart of the Christian gospel (good news). I have summarized the ‘gospel of peace’ under four headings – or ‘touchstones’. The idea of a touchstone is that it is a place which we can keep coming back to in order to get reoriented when we are lost. There are plenty of places we can get lost in the Bible and Christian tradition and some of these places are very violent indeed. I’ll address the four touchstones over four weeks and then, in the fifth week, I’ll draw out some implications for how we deal with violence in the Bible, from genocide to pathological murder, to the concepts of judgement, wrath and hell (cheery stuff).

So let’s start with the *first* touchstone in the Gospel of Peace. The first touchstone is all about how we imagine God. Part of the problem of violence can be traced back to our image of God. If God is a word which means what we place in the center of our life – in the center of our making-meaning – then what is this god like? The Jews had a very big problem with idolatry because to make an image of God risked *becoming like* the idol. *We become what we worship*. The Psalmist summarized this in Psalm 135:15-18.

15 the idols of the nations are silver and gold,

the work of human hands.

16 They have mouths, but they do not speak;

they have eyes, but they do not see;

17 they have ears, but they do not hear,

and there is no breath in their mouths.

18 Those who make them

and all who trust them

shall become like them.

¹ <https://anglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NAFVP-Top-Line-Results-Report-NCLS-Research.pdf>

This is so important because long history has demonstrated that human beings tend to very easily make God in our own image, to support our own desires and wish fulfilments. Someone who saw this acutely was the twentieth century theologian, Karl Barth. As Barth observed the rise of the German Imperial war machine in the early 20th century, along with the enthusiastic endorsement of its operations by 90% of the church-attending Christians in Germany Barth discerned that this massive political and ethical failure was underpinned by a profound theological error - which was to begin theology somewhere other than the decisive revelation of God in Jesus Christ (for example by giving the Nazi party any voice at all in relation to theology and Christian life). This led to Barth's role in framing *The Barman Declaration (1934)* to keep returning Christians to the absolute centrality of the person of Jesus Christ as the basis of life.

If we don't start our thinking about God with *Jesus*, we'll obviously be starting somewhere else. One possibility, for example, would be to *begin* thinking about God by assembling a vast collection of adjectives about God from the scriptures. Then we add them all up and says, 'this is what God is like'. One example is the Westminster Catechism. *Question Seven: What is God?* 'God is

*'infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth'..*²

This is quite a list, pieced together from multitudes of passages from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. But that is *not* what the apostolic witnesses, whose testimony ultimately found expression in the Christian Testament, do. They *begin* their proclamation about God with Jesus. The Christian Testament concisely states this in several places:

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Colossians 1:15 [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation

Hebrews 1:1-3 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son [child], whom God appointed heir of all things, through whom God also created the worlds. Christ [Jesus] is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and Christ sustains all things by God's powerful word.

A former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, summarized it when he said, '*God is Christlike and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all.*'³

More generically, as in the first letter of John, we might say, 'God is love' (1 John 4:16). But John can only say that because he has encountered that love in a very particular form, in the shape of Jesus, crucified (by us) and risen. The significance of the *Word becoming flesh* is not that Jesus is a first century Jewish male but that Jesus is a human being who dies for us. Jesus's most common way of referring to himself was 'the human one'. This God is not an abstract construction of philosophy which we can master with our language. God must inescapably use ordinary stuff – carbon atoms – to physically reveal God's physical being as love. This is sometimes called the *scandal of particularity*. Annie Dillard put it like this:

"That Christ's incarnation occurred improbably, ridiculously, at such-and-such a time, into such-and-such a place, is referred to—with great sincerity even among believers—as "the scandal of particularity." Well, the "scandal of particularity" is the only world that I, in particular, know. What use has eternity for light? We're all up to our necks in this particular scandal".⁴

² I'm grateful to Michael Hardin for this insight....adjectives from the Larger Westminster Catechism, Q 7.

³ cited by John V Taylor, Preface to *The Christlike God*.

⁴ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 80.

So when we are saying that God is Christlike it's a kind of shorthand way of saying, *God is love; and this love is not an abstract concept but is present to us a person.*⁵ This is the first touchstone: **God is Christlike - humble crucified love.** This is our foundational 'go-to' point when we get bamboozled by biblical details or thorny questions. This is also the key to reading the rest of the Bible, including the Hebrew Scriptures. As Christ followers, we need to read the Bible *backwards*, in order to discern the eternal presence of Christ. For Christians, the creation story begins at John 1:1, not at Genesis 1:1. The God who created the cosmos was, is and always has been the crucified one.

The revelation of God in Christ must be allowed to interrogate and interpret *everything* including the written words of scripture.⁶ For Christians, the primary 'Word of God' is not a book – it is a living person. This person – Christ - is *mediated* to us through scripture, church, sacrament and other people, through the Spirit.

Typically, the living Christ – the living Word, breaks through to us as a surprising gift and moment of insight. St Paul makes it clear that he didn't figure out, with his unaided human reason, that Jesus was the Christ. Neither did Paul understand Jesus by reading the scriptures, even though he knew his scriptures extremely well. In fact, prior to Christ, Saul of Tarsus *weaponized* the scriptures, finding plenty of material there to justify persecuting the church. Rather Paul received an 'apocalypse' which means an 'unveiling...a revelation'. The veil between worlds parted.

This is the kind of seeing that mystics speak of. It comes unexpectedly and cannot be forced. Such a breakthrough might come to some people as a 'bam', as happened to Paul on the Damascus Rd, or more commonly for most people, it might come as a still small voice over time. Either way, we don't control the process. It is all grace. Our hearts are softened and we discover we are lovable and loved. The softened heart then has some hope of reading the scriptures as they were intended to be read, as pointing to Jesus. The very most we will ever contribute is a patient waiting "until the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts" (2 Peter 1:19).

All Christian theology is therefore oriented by Christ and to Christ. There was never a time when God was not like Christ, drawing all of creation gracefully to God's self. As Paul put it,

Ephesians 1:9-10 God has made known to us the mystery of God's will, according to God's good pleasure that God set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to *gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.*

God's intention is to bring *all things* into union with God through Christ. So we can relax and celebrate this promise. God loves *everyone*. God loves all that God has made. Like parents with their children election is universal and irrevocable. Once we have children we cannot send them back. Same-same with God. The relationship between us and God is rooted in covenant (in unbreakable commitment) not in contract.

Living and leading nonviolently is rooted in this fundamental premise that God has revealed God as Christlike, by grace and that God's intention and promise is to draw everything and everyone into union with himself, with our free choice and in the process of doing so, we grow into the image of Christ.

A primary implication of this first touchstone, for peace and nonviolence, is in the way we *look* at ourselves and others. When we look at ourselves in the mirror and when we look at our neighbor, what do we see? Do we see them as God sees them, as creatures/children of the Christlike God, loved by God, made in the image

⁵ More specifically, a communion of persons (Trinity). Christlike love is an eternal relationship between persons. These persons are not defined by gender but by their kenotic relationship to each other. God is not male! The particular is vital and inescapable but God is ultimately universal – not constrained by space and time.

⁶ This could be summarised as applying the "Emmaus" lens (Luke 24:25-27) and this means reading the scriptures spiritually/Christologically, as Paul discusses in 1 Cor. 2 and 2 Cor.3.

of God and irrevocably called by God to a loving purpose and end? When we see people in this way it will be very difficult to do violence to them.

Lest this sounds all too much sweetness and light, next week we will do a bit of reality checking. If God's covenant promise is irrevocable, what do we mean when we talk about Christ *saving* us? If we are being saved, then saved from what? This is the territory we will head into in the next Touchstone. But just as a little foretaste of where this is heading, I will say now that God's saving work in Christ is to save us from ourselves, not to save us from an angry God. If we know the character of God in and through Christ, this includes the grim reality that this is the God who experiences the *violence* of humanity. The fact that God is Christlike from the foundation of the world sheds light (reveals) the dark side of our human condition. This is the grim pit which we will jump into next time (if anyone shows up, that is).