

Prayer of Illumination

Let Your Spirit, Lord God, visit us, and the winds of heaven blow warmly upon us; that our dark clouds may be driven away, and the light of Your Truth may dawn upon us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jesus said, ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the world. No, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.’

Matthew 10: 34

Jesus did not come to bring peace, but a sword. He said that he would set sons against fathers, daughters against their mothers, daughters-in-law against their mothers-in-law and a man’s worst enemies will be the members of his own family. ‘I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.’ The motto of the Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary of Virginia, founded in 1823, is ‘Seek the truth; come whence it may, cost what it will.’ Following the cyclone in Burma and the earthquake in China, I said in a sermon ‘It is not good theology to say that God allows earthquakes, cyclones and tsunamis and then pulls a handful of survivors from the wreckage.’ A child pulled alive from beneath the debris of a fallen building having lain there for days is not a miracle. It is not the answer to prayer and it is not the work of an almighty interventionist god. I understand the hysteria and despair of the parents in the first instance and the relief and unspeakable joy on seeing their child found alive, but God did not make the building fall in such a way that the child survived. Nor did He lead the rescue team to that child. If He did save one child, then He needs to work on His rescue techniques because He missed the majority.

Christianity is dying. The rapid growth we hear of in Africa may mask this fact, but be in no doubt that the religion called Christianity is dying. Moderators travel the country in a holy bubble and return each year to the General Assembly and report on the life and vibrancy of the church. In true Callaghan style, they declare, 'Crisis? What crisis?' Christianity and the Church are dying because humanity's self-understanding has moved on. Our self-understanding has changed and expanded. Our worldview is different from that of all previous generations but our theology has remained largely the same. In the church we crave the familiar. In a rapidly changing society, we want and we feel we need the church to remain the same. Whether it is in the form of our worship, the layout of our sanctuary and design of our buildings or our theology, we crave the familiar. The familiar brings us security. In terms of theology in particular, there are aspects of it which have now in the twenty-first century become the Church's greatest liability. Do we dare seek the truth; come whence it may, cost what it will? God and Truth can never be incompatible: do we dare seek the truth?

I want to begin with the fear of death. The great poet Philip Larkin wrote these lines:

Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.
Arid interrogation: yet the dread of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The mind blinks at the glare...
...at the total emptiness for ever,
The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die.

Is our worship in this church today a ‘vast moth-eaten musical brocade?’ Are we fooling ourselves? Is this a sham? Is our faith an illusion? Most, if not all religions, have at least one of their main roots growing out of the basic human fear of death, of nothingness.

If one root of religion is the fear of death, then another is tribalism. ‘Human beings are by definition tribal people....Tribalism was the pathway to survival.’ A New Zealand athletic T-shirt proclaims, ‘I root for New Zealand and whoever is playing Australia.’ Belonging to a tribe brings security but it also dehumanises those who are not in our tribe. In moments of war and conflict, we do not kill human beings like ourselves. We kill the Huns, the Krauts, the Japs, the Nips, the VC, the insurgents, the fanatics and the terrorists. In modern conflict, we attack and destroy ‘military targets.’ Human beings are tribal to the core and the religions of the world, including Christianity, have a deep tribal mentality. The Jews were God’s chosen people, His chosen tribe. The Gentiles were not His chosen people.

With tribalism comes prejudice and with prejudice comes anger. There is a link between religion and prejudice and anger and violence. In the United States, it was the Bible-belt which was the most vociferous in the defence of slavery and, later, segregation. In the words of one commentator:

Fire hoses and police dogs were turned on demonstrators throughout the South. Children in churches were murdered by bombs. Civil rights workers were kidnapped and executed. States in which the churchgoing percentage was the highest closed their public schools to prevent admitting black children, preferring the encouragement of total ignorance to the destruction of their patterns of discrimination. No one can deny the anger that gripped that section of the country as segregation was forced to die. Nor can anyone deny that the Christianity of that region justified and encouraged that anger.

In 2005, Edgar Ray Killen was convicted of murdering three men in Mississippi. The crime occurred in 1964 but the trials at the time resulted in hung juries. He was finally convicted

three years ago. Killen was a member of the Klu Klux Klan and a preacher in the Baptist Church. We are tribal to the core and we demonise those who are not in our group. Once demonised, we can do what we like to them.

I have spoken about religion as being to some extent rooted in our fear of death and I have spoken about how our evolutionary tribal origin informs religion. I want also to speak about the anger of God. Lying at the heart of mainstream Christian theology is the concept of an angry God who needs to punish us for our sins. We are saved by the shedding of divine blood. God's wrath is satisfied by the death of His innocent Son. In the words of one commentator:

Christianity has given us a God who caused the death of his son, the damnation of disbelievers, the subordination of women, the bloody massacre of the Crusades, the terror of judgement, the wrath towards homosexuals and the justification of slavery. The Father God...chooses some of the world's children while rejecting others. He is the father of wrath, the father of male ordination and female submission, the father of literal and spiritual slavery.

John Shelby Spong, the radical former Episcopal Bishop of Newark, goes further.

Forthrightly, Spong says:

Who needs a God who would require the death of the divine Son before being willing to forgive a fallen humanity? That is a portrait of God as a divine child abuser. We should rejoice in the death of such a deity. A parent who would act toward his or her child in the way we suggest God has acted would be called immoral. I think that it is high time we proclaim [this] God to be immoral also.

Our view of the world has changed. Our self-understanding has changed. We no longer think of ourselves as being just a little lower than the angels. Now we are just a little higher than the apes. We are deeply connected to all living things, from apes to cabbages. All theology is a human construct. It is based on our religious intuition, our unshakable sense of the Spirit of God burning in our heart and life and our theology is informed by our

understanding of the world and universe in which we live. Christianity is dying and the Church is dying because theology is not keeping pace with our worldview and self-understanding. I have spoken about our fear of death, our tribal history, our prejudices, anger and the anger of God. Do we dare to seek truth; come whence it may, cost what it will? If we believe in God, then we have nothing to fear. What of Jesus?

Jesus said, 'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the world. No, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.' Jesus is the most beautiful human being who has ever lived. The stature of his humanity is the telling mark of his divinity. It is not hard to understand why his followers began to believe that he was divine. It is not hard for me to believe that God was in Christ. He is the Word made flesh. The essence of the Christian gospel is that Jesus came to bring life, life in all its fullness. The Authorised Version reads, 'I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.' The Living Bible renders it, 'My purpose is to give life in all its fullness.' Jesus said, 'My purpose is to give life in all its fullness,' and that essential gospel message would come like a sword – to the religion and religious of his day!

We are tribal to the core and with that tribalism come prejudice and anger and violence. To the tribalism and prejudice of his day, Jesus took the sword of the gospel. 'The unclean, rejectable scum of the first-century Jewish world' were the Samaritans. They were half-breeds and heretics. Travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem Jews would take a huge detour in order to avoid Samaria. The parable that we have come to know as 'The Good Samaritan' is religiously explosive. This is offensive to Jewish ears but it attacks our tribal core. Salvation and wholeness comes to humanity when we are able to overcome our evolutionary survival-orientated tribalism. Jesus was and is teaching us that we cannot be human in

isolation. The extent to which we dehumanise those who are different from us is the extent to which we are ourselves dehumanised by our own actions. As if that parable is not enough, Luke's Gospel records the story of the healing of the Ten Lepers. Only the Samaritan, the half-breed, heretic, foreigner returns to Jesus, to God's prophet, to thank him and praise God. There is no way round this: Jesus is attacking tribalism and prejudice. He is attacking the religion and religious of his day.

John's Gospel goes further. Jesus talks to a Samaritan at the well and that Samaritan is a woman. In the Jewish worldview of his day, women were property. He discusses theology with her: he talks about places to worship and liturgy. She's a woman! The extent to which men dehumanise women is the extent to which they are dehumanised by their own actions. In the story of Martha and Mary of Bethany Martha becomes annoyed with her sister, Mary, because while Martha is busy preparing the meal Mary sits at the feet of Jesus listening to his teaching. Martha is not annoyed because she alone is doing all the hard work. She is annoyed at her sister and Jesus because it is not a woman's place to sit at the feet of a teacher and pretend that she is a disciple. Jesus affirms Mary and gently challenges Martha concerning the religious view of women. And what of the woman who touches the hem of Jesus' garment whose menstrual flow is constant? She was unclean, ostracised and living with no self-worth. She touches him and he affirms and heals her. For two thousand years women have been denied the right to celebrate the sacraments, to stand at the holy table, because of their menstrual cycle, because they are unclean. For two thousand years the Church has forbidden them to celebrate the Lord's Supper, to break the Bread and lift the Cup, symbols of the Body and Blood of Christ, yet the woman with the constant flow touched the body of Christ – and He affirmed her.

Jesus acknowledged the humanity of Samaritans, Gentiles, women and he said that there is no religious law which has been written, not even the Law of the Sabbath, which is more important than the enhancement of human life. When the woman caught committing adultery is brought to Jesus he stands between her and her accusers. Had they stoned her they would have become less human, more violent and more prone to hatred, prejudice and anger. Moralism and righteousness never lead to love. Human history is a tale of tribalism and prejudice against mentally ill people, African-American people, Jewish people, left-handed people, gay and lesbian people, women, children and young people and all of them have felt the sting of religious rejection. Jesus said, 'I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.'

The Church needs a new theology, a theology which moves away from the God of miracles and magic and divine interventions from above, to a theology in which God is primarily seen in and through the humanity of Jesus. I realise that this is a long sermon but let me close with this quote from Bishop Spong:

Jesus is arrested. He is alone. He is doomed. His life is near its end, but watch and observe the portrait the gospel writers painted of how he died: He was betrayed but he loved his betrayer. He was forsaken but he loved those who forsook him. His arrest was challenged but he demanded that his defenders put up their swords. He was falsely accused but he was silent in the face of his accusers. There was nothing defensive about him. Even when he was mocked and tormented, he loved his mockers and tormentors. He was scourged and he loved his scourgers. He was denied and he loved his denier. He was crucified and he loved his killers. Hostility and rejection, abuse and death – these did not diminish his humanity. That is a portrait of a fully human one who has no need to hate or to hurt.

On the cross we find redemption. In the words of the Gentile Roman Centurion at the foot of the cross, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!' Amen.

ⁱ Throughout this sermon I have quoted freely from the latest book of John Shelby Spong, 'Jesus for the Non Religious'