

Friendship Baptist Church, January 26, 2003

Jesus, Suffering, Hope

Introduction

It is wonderful that Friendship Baptist Church is wrestling with issues of suffering and violence in the world. Thanks so much for permitting me to participate in the struggle.

My task today is to look in broad strokes at suffering and hope through a Christian lens: more specifically, through the sieve of being, what the early Christian writers called, “*in Christ*”. Hence the title: **Jesus, Suffering, Hope**.

Esther, my wife, and I, had the joy of celebrating twenty-five years of marriage together last Summer by driving a rental car around Europe for three weeks.

As we observed the many monuments in the various major European cities commemorating historical events going back centuries, the parade of past military glories in city after city was noteworthy. The history of Europe is written, it seems from its cities’ ubiquitous monuments, in terms of military conquest, as the history of the world is best understood in terms of *empire*.

At least since the Roman Empire, but arguably throughout the entire human story on this planet, as far as written records can demonstrate, “The concept of Empire is presented as a global concert under the direction of a single conductor, a unitary power that maintains the social peace and produces its ethical truths. And in order to achieve these ends, the single power is given the ... force to conduct, when necessary, ‘just wars’ at the borders against barbarians and internally against the rebellious (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri *Empire*, p. 10).”

Empire as unitary force chooses a means of establishing peace, the *pax Romana* of a bygone era, or the *pax Americana* of the contemporary one, through what one anthropologist describes as a *scapegoat mechanism*, necessitating an endless supply of victims to achieve social cohesion, civilization, and peace. Western civilization, our own existence in this society, is built upon destroying or removing our enemies from amongst us.

As one journalist put the matter, while describing the execution in Florida a few years ago of serial killer Theodore Bundy: “... execution... ‘is a brutal act,’ but it is one carried out ‘in the name of civilization.’ ”

Western civilization, all civilizations in human history, are edifices fundamentally built upon violence and human suffering. Brutal acts are carried out to secure peace.

Some may recall Pogo, the 1950’s Walt Kelly comic pages possum character, who said repeatedly: “*We have met the enemy and he is us.*” Insofar as we endorse the ongoing

enterprise of civilization through the perpetration of brutal acts, we *are* the enemy, says Pogo!

Suffering and Hope

As I reflect upon the theme beginning last week, my mind expands to a suffering world that has been the constant lot of humanity. Ever since Cain killed Abel, the world has modelled a response to conflict that sooner or later, and so regularly sooner, erupts into violent destruction of the other.

“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don’t get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (James 4:1-3).”

What a pithy indictment of the human condition!

The overwhelming human suffering abounding in this world arises, we are told by James, from our unmet desires that induce conflict with and destruction of, others.

A few years ago I had a long discussion with a Member of Parliament who advocated the return of the death penalty. I told him of a group in the United States known as *Murder Victims Families for Reconciliation*. To belong to that group, one must have lost a loved one to murder. Their mission?: *to shut down executions in the United States*. Most are committed Christians who understand from Jesus that the response to their enemy, the murderer of their loved ones, is to *forgive*, not to *execute*.

This particular Canadian MP, a born-again Christian by his own account, who subsequently was convicted of sexually abusing young native girls while an RCMP constable in the prairies, responded: “Then they better not eat chicken!” That comment was lost on me, so he explained. He had a brother who, growing up on the farm, hated chopping off the heads of chickens, but loved fried chicken! If, this MP said, you want to enjoy chicken, if that group opposing the death penalty in the States wants to benefit from the “good life” of American society, the American way, then, he said, *you’ve got to kill enemies to secure it*.

He was right, of course. In fact, he was paraphrasing the Bible, and describing the history of civilization, what a recent author depicts as “the clash of barbarisms (Gilbert Achcar, *The Clash of Barbarisms*).” He was alluding to the great insight of High Priest Caiaphas: “*You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man [one enemy] die for the people than that the whole nation perish (John 11:49-50).*” One, a hundred thousand, millions even. The enemies must die for the greater good of, well, of us, the *good guys*, the *righteous nations under God* (invariably), of course!

Now that is universal scapegoating logic that is the commonplace of born-again President Bush, committed Christian Prime Minister Tony Blair, our own waffling Christian Prime Minister, the vast network of Western corporate media, and of most of humanity since Cain killed Abel. It is also the stuff of universal political common sense that says: “*Rather kill than be killed*”. However sophisticated the idea may be presented at times, in the end it comes down to one ultimate piece of *Realpolitik*: The West, Western civilization, Canada, the United States, are committed to a political realism whose bottom line watchword is: *Destroy your enemies*.

Would you dare dispute that?

So, when Jean Chrétien, then Leader of the Opposition, initially opposed Prime Minister Mulroney in contemplating sending our military to join the 1991 Gulf War, as soon as Canada entered the slaughter, Chrétien reversed his stance, and blessed Canada’s warmakers.

Here is a partial listing of what then Opposition Leader Chrétien endorsed:

On January 16, 1991, the US military (and Allies) began bombing Baghdad at 6:30 p.m. E.S.T. – prime-time news hour in the United States. One hundred and ten thousand air sorties (about two per minute for six weeks) dropped eighty-eight thousand tons of explosives. The consequent destruction was estimated to be seven times greater than the force of the Hiroshima bomb dropped by the US that killed about 100,000 civilians instantaneously. The main targets were the entire military and civilian infrastructure of Iraq that reduced it to pre-industrialization status in forty days. Along the dubbed “Highway to Hell”, Allied forces pounded retreating Iraqi conscripts, many thousands as young as eleven years old, incinerating and shredding ten to fifteen thousand of them.

The official estimate of Iraqi casualties after forty days were one hundred thousand troops killed, and three hundred thousand wounded. Further fallout from the Gulf War was massive unemployment; skyrocketing cost of living; vast increases in a range of diseases, including childhood illnesses; a child mortality rate explosion of three hundred and eighty percent. There was environmental degradation that devastated vast tracts of arable land; polluted huge ocean reaches through oil spills; and produced at least one thousand two hundred oil fires that created massive crop failures throughout the Middle East and south Asia.

Approximately one million two hundred thousand Iraqi children alone have died due to the ensuing trade embargos. These deaths, you recall, were declared by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, whose family were Holocaust survivors, to be “on balance a good thing”. The bombing has continued almost daily ever since the War’s official end.

And there is yet again a massive American build-up of troops and weaponry poised to destroy many more hundreds of thousands of lives, and waste yet again vast tracts of the good earth.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, *this is monstrous moral evil that we are watching unfold before our very eyes!* And it is invariably depicted as justified, even righteous! What one expects of a Western “civilized” nation. Worst, it is common sense, the norm, what Hannah Arendt depicted as “*the banality of evil*”, with reference to the Nazis.

Have we not, we the compliant citizens of North America, of Canada, of the United States, Christians to be sure, *have we not met the enemy indeed, and he is us?*

The Ultimate Non-Violent Text

You heard read this morning Jesus’ most classic text, arguably in human literature, on violence.: Matt. 5:38 to 48 in the Sermon on the Mount.

[“*You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*”]

There is simply no way to read this text, to read Jesus, and not to conclude that Jesus taught nonviolence. One leading New Testament theologian then asks: “Do the other texts in the canon reinforce the Sermon on the Mount’s teaching on nonviolence, or do they provide other options that might allow or require Christians to take up the sword?”

He answers:

“When the question is posed this way, the immediate result . . . is to underscore how impressively univocal [one-voiced] is the testimony of the New Testament writers on this point. The evangelists are unanimous in portraying Jesus as a Messiah who subverts all prior expectations by assuming the vocation of suffering rather than conquering Israel’s enemies.” The author continues with a guided tour throughout the rest of the New Testament literature and concludes: “Thus, from Matthew to Revelation we find a consistent witness against violence and a calling to the community to follow the example of Jesus in *accepting* suffering rather than *inflicting* it (Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, pp. 329, 330, 332).”

Mahatma Gandhi said: “*The only people on earth who do not see Christ and His teachings as nonviolent are Christians.*”

Now that is an incredible indictment that rings nonetheless true.

And Pogo said: “*We have met the enemy and he is us.*”

Two Movies and A Story

The Mission

In the 1986 award-winning movie by agnostic film director Roland Joffé, Father Gabriel, a Jesuit missionary, brings Christianity to the native people above the breathtakingly beautiful Iguazu Falls in 18th century Argentina. Eventually, the territory is turned over to the Portuguese, and with that, slavery is again permitted. The result is the destruction of the Jesuit missions in the area, and the slaughter of all but a few children survivors of the natives who had converted to Christianity.

When the entire work of the mission is unraveling, and the methodical destruction of the missionary enterprise under way, there is a riveting exchange between Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons) and the new convert, Rodruigo Mendoza (Robert de Niro), a former slave driver and murderer. Mendoza asks for Father Gabriel’s blessing to take up the sword and fight.

[movie clip – until “I can’t bless you.”]

“If might is right”, says Father Gabriel, “then love has no place in this world. It may be so. It may be so.”

Father Gabriel chooses not to take up the sword; Mendoza returns to the sword. Without giving away how the movie ends, in case you have not seen it, a Bible verse is displayed by this agnostic film director just before the credits role. It is riveting in the movie’s context:

“The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:5).”

Dead Man Walking

Sister Helen Prejean, author of the book *Dead Man Walking*, is portrayed in a movie by the same title doing her death row visitation in Angola State Prison in Louisiana. One of the persons she visits, a composite character named Matthew Poncelet, played by Sean Penn, is clearly a detestable human being who participated in the brutal rape and murder of a teenage girl, and the cold-blooded killing of her boyfriend.

The Catholic nun, played by Susan Sarandon for which she won the Best Actress Academy Award, accompanies Poncelet ultimately to the execution chamber. We watch the methodical horror of a step-by-step application of death by lethal injection. In a scene too graphic for full depiction today, Poncelet, strapped to a gurney, at one point is raised in crucifixion posture for all in the viewing room to see and hear.

[movie clip – until “...whether it’s me, or you all, or your government.”]

Poncelet's dying words about the wrong of state killing and his own wrong in killing are possibly the most arresting of the film.

The viewer must wrestle with the unavoidable question: Is Matthew Poncelet right?: *murder and the death penalty are morally indistinguishable*. Embrace or reject one, and the other must also be eschewed or affirmed. Or what kind of universe do we inhabit, after all?

The real-life Sister Prejean who was an advisor to the movie, wrote in her book: "I am convinced that if executions were made public, the torture and violence would be unmasked, and we would be shamed into abolishing executions (*Dead Man Walking*, p. 197)." She was hoping that bringing a state execution into mass viewing across America would incite moral indignation on such a scale that Americans would rise up against the death penalty.

Forgiven and Forgiving

In the book *Orbit of Darkness*, novelist Ian MacMillan tells the true story of a Catholic priest, Father Maximilian Kolbe, who offers to take the place of a Jew condemned to die with others by the concentration camp's commandant. The story unfolds over two weeks in the priest's life against the backdrop of vignettes of people coping with the horrors of World War II. The many vignettes demonstrate a universal conviction, like C.S. Lewis', "that violence is inescapable and cannot be unlearned (Gregory L. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, p. 92)." Meanwhile, the priest with the other condemned prisoners, is slowly being starved to death. But he begins to unnerve his Nazi guards and inspire his fellow prisoners. He refuses to withhold an attitude of forgiveness towards the guards, and remains cheerful and hopeful towards all. He embodies the understanding, articulated by another character in the novel, that "Those who give up their lives, at least in principle, become more dangerous to the Germans than planes or tanks. They become the ultimate weapon (Ian MacMillan, *Orbit of Darkness*, p. 249)."

One book reviewer comments: "There is a way of unlearning sin and evil in general, and violence in particular; it is found in embodying habits and practices of forgiveness in the service of holiness. That way is costly, and, as such, may require a willingness to give up our lives... [A]s the priest so clearly saw, the alternative to embodying forgiveness is not less death, but more horrifying death and destruction, more frightening terror. Further, embodying forgiveness is the way that offers new life and a hopeful future to those who suffer *and* to those who inflict suffering (Gregory L. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, p. 98)."

It bears repeating: *embodying forgiveness is the way that offers new life and a hopeful future to those who suffer and to those who inflict suffering.*

And *that* is Gospel essence!

Finding God in the Enemy

The test case, according to the New Testament, for love of God is love of neighbour. “*If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen (I John 4:20).*” The test case for love of neighbour is love of enemy. “*If you love those who love you*”, Jesus says, “*what credit is that to you?... But love your enemies, do good to them (Luke 6: 32 & 35).*...” Put mathematically, Love of enemy = Love of neighbour = Love of God. Stated more starkly: **Love your enemies: it is the *only* way to know God.** Or ratcheted to its ultimate conclusion: **If one does not find God in the enemy, one does not find God.**

Had majority Christendom followed such a maxim, what an incredibly different history the Christian West would have known! And, I will add without developing it, its moral leadership against the mass Western slaughter of abortion would have the inestimable power of a *consistent pro-life ethic*. The early church’s watchword was: *Ecclesia abhorret a sanguine – The church abhors the shedding of blood*. Tragically, that is not so today, nor in majority church witness throughout the centuries.

In the words of one New Testament commentator:

“I submit that the ultimate religious question today should no longer be the Reformation’s question, ‘How can I find a gracious God?’ but rather, ‘How can we find God in our enemies?’ What guilt was for Luther, the enemy has become for us: the goad that can drive us to God....

“There is in fact no other way to God for our time but through the enemy, for loving the enemy has become the key to both human survival in the nuclear age and to personal transformation...

“Jesus’ teachings about ... love of enemies are also the acid tests of true Christianity (Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p. 263).”

Conclusion: Hope

The Apostle Paul wrote, in possibly the most beautiful panegyric to neighbour love in the history of human literature: “*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love (1 Cor 13:13).*”

I want to conclude with a note of hope. One author, writing in 1986, traces “the exponential increase in the use of nonviolence in just the last few years.” He continues: “Something radically new is happening in human affairs, and many people have failed to notice it (Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p. 244).”

In 1989 alone, almost 2 billion people comprising 32% of humanity, in thirteen Iron Curtain countries, experienced almost completely nonviolent revolutions which

overthrew the dictatorial hold of communism. Fully 64% of humanity (over 3 billion people) since 1986 have been touched profoundly by nonviolent direct action (Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p. 264).

The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesian Christians: “*And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment-- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ (Eph 1:9-10).*”

Then, “*The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,*” says the LORD (Isa 65:25).

The Christian call is to wait and act in hope, living out the *then* of the Peaceable Kingdom in the *now* of our daily lives. Until Kingdom Come.

Amen!