

Langley Mennonite Fellowship – “Lest We Forget”: Peace Sunday Sermon, November 9, 2008

By Wayne Northey

Introduction

The church is called to be *now* what the world is meant to be *then*. *Peace* is possibly the most poignant, difficult and elusive goal of the entire creation. *Lest we forget*, title of my sermon, *the church is nonetheless called to peace*.

This is perhaps the essence of the simple words of Jesus at the end of Luke 11:2: “... *your kingdom come*.”, and the more expanded words in Matt 6:10: “...*your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*.”

In the Psalm we heard this morning were these words: “*Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear, he burns the shields with fire* (Ps 46:8-9).” This is God’s will throughout the earth.

Peace Sunday and Humanity’s Universal Cry for Peace

Today is Peace Sunday. Lest we forget, there is a universal human yearning captured in the words of the psalm just read: “*He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth...*” This is part of “Kingdom Come”, of God’s will being done *now* on earth as it is in heaven by the church that prays it, so that one day *then* the world can experience Kingdom Come in its fullness.

We’ve just come through two North American elections. While many of our hopes were dashed that warmongering Stephen Harper remained Prime Minister, we were thrilled on many counts, no less than for the huge political challenge this represents to our Canadian Conservatives, that Barack Obama became President-Elect. While I hate to rain on that parade, this phenomenally historic advent that a Black has become President, *Obama’s central foreign policy goal is nonetheless to destroy militarily the Taliban and al-Qaeda*. This, *emphatically*, is *not* Kingdom Come! Apart from the fact that al-Qaeda is a product of American imperialism, brilliantly so argued in Mahmood Mamdani’s *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, America remains a brutal empire, one of the most ruthless empires in world history. There is no empire known to history that does not do what it takes to... *take what it wants*. This includes the empire knowingly committing every form of violence, raping, pillaging and mass slaughter needed. The only difference about the British and American Empires is, for the first time in history, the torch was passed from one, the British, to the other, the American, at the end of the 19th century, without a war of conquest. Obama remains committed overall to maintaining American empire. *This is, sadly, obscenely immoral and defiantly anti-Kingdom Come*. Lest we forget, Mark Kurlansky observes:

It is a peculiarly accepted notion that the United States, the only country ruthless enough ever to have used atomic weapons – and used them against a civilian population – should be trusted with a monopoly on weapons of mass destruction (*Nonviolence*, p. 178).

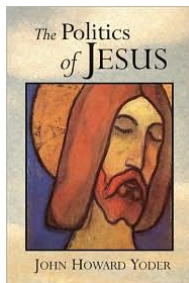
More from Kurlansky later. For Canada to participate in this “War on Terror”, NATO, etc., is to embrace obscenity.

In the history of the West, there have been two kinds of wars that all nations and all empires have fought: *external* against foreign enemies, and *internal* against domestic enemies. It was President Ronald Reagan who actually coined the term, “war on crime”. But this kind of “war” has throughout Western history since the 11th century been fought against criminals, the state’s domestic enemies, in the West. During the Papal Revolution of that era the Roman Justinian law codes were rediscovered and the West moved decisively towards a non-communitarian, non-peacemaking, retributive and brutal treatment of – “war” against – criminals. At its Christian best, since the mid-1970’s, and thanks to the initiative of Canadian Mennonites in Kitchener, Ontario, Restorative Justice has become an outstanding international *peacemaking* response to this utterly discredited and brutal way of treating criminals. I will not focus today on the *war on crime* against Western states’ enemies. I like however this statement by Deirdre Golash:

The history of punishment is in some respects like the history of war; it seems to accompany the human condition almost universally, to enjoy periods of glorification, to be commonly regarded as justified in many instances, and yet to run counter to our ultimate vision of what human society should be.

This certainly describes the *reality* of the war on crime measured against the *vision* of Kingdom Come. Unlike other kinds of eschatologies, we hold out here at LMF for a *future* that is *now*! If so, how do we understand this, and live it out?

The Future Now and Where I Came From



I grew up in a Christian tradition that claimed to take Jesus and the biblical text seriously. It was therefore a huge shock to me when I first attended Regent College in the fall of 1974, and took in Professor Clark Pinnock’s inter-term three-week course entitled, “The Politics of Jesus”. He had lifted that title straight from a book published two years earlier by Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. I was of the mind until that point that, in the words of Regent College’s then vice-principal, Dr. William Martin, “There are no politics in the Bible”. He said that to me with reference to Pinnock’s semester course taught the next fall by that same title. Dr. Martin like me was from that faith tradition that a church historian dubbed “quintessential fundamentalist”, that until 30 years ago at least was almost purely a-political, centrally pietist and otherworldly in its *understanding* of God and mission, though practice on the mission field back then thankfully often transcended the disconnect to neighbour and created order.

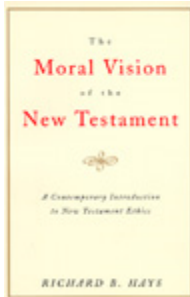
Though I had “accepted Christ as Saviour” at the tender age of four, as I always told in giving my testimony, though I was baptized at 12 and studied the Bible religiously from that day onwards, making copious notes for years and winning the approbation of the elders in my church and our missionaries, I was still in for the shock of my life until then when I first sat down for that three-week course of Dr. Pinnock, January, 1975. On principle I refused to read Yoder’s text, though it was the only one assigned, and we had to hand in a report on it. I passed the course somehow, but felt rather furious at the “strange Gospel” Pinnock was peddling and many embraced that wet January over three decades ago.

But Pinnock, and, I eventually conceded, Yoder, hooked me, and took me through two conversions. In the thirty plus years since I arrived an eager young theologian at Regent College, most pietistic traditions have undergone what I call my first post-Christian “conversion” experience: *they became not only convinced that the Bible is about politics*, in the United States their current representatives comprise the greatest block of supporters for President Bush (and Senators McCain and Palin) and the Republican party. Evangelicals, largely of pietistic origin, have indeed discovered politics in the Bible.

Psalm 24 starts out: *The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; ... There is something called God's Politics*, title of noted Evangelical leader Jim Wallis' recent book, since God superintends the world and everything that goes on in it. To that most Evangelicals in my background now say a hearty *Amen!* But not so many say yet *Amen* to my *second conversion to peacemaking and nonviolence*.

We've just come through an election in Canada where numerous contenders were born again Bible-believing Evangelical Christians. South of the border, all recent presidential and vice-presidential contenders were such, except Senator Joseph Biden, a committed Roman Catholic. Tony Blair, until recently British Prime Minister, was also an Evangelical leader. Evangelicals have indeed discovered politics. When it comes to exercise of state violence however, one asks the question, *Just what politics have the majority of Evangelicals discovered?* I wish my fellow Evangelicals would also discover that *the biblical way of doing politics is the counterintuitive way of the nonviolent cross*. And this applies to the person as much as to the state. Lest we forget, God's politics are one.

Violence and Scripture



Richard Hays, an American New Testament theologian, has written the premier contemporary study on how to do New Testament ethics. The massive tome is entitled *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation*. After spending the first few hundred pages meticulously presenting *how* to read the New Testament to excavate its ethics, he supplies several case studies to demonstrate the method. One is the issue of violence in defence of justice. In a chapter by that title, Hays leaves no exegetical task unturned in sifting through the entire New Testament for its witness concerning violence.

He begins with Matthew's Gospel, in particular the Sermon on the Mount, pointing out Jesus' followers are tasked with showing God's character most decisively seen in "loving enemies", that is utterly incompatible with killing them. He writes:

Thus, the church's embodiment of nonviolence is—according to the Sermon on the Mount—its indispensable witness to the gospel (p. 329).

He gives an overview of the entire sweep of the New Testament, arguing that the Sermon on the Mount/Plain materials in Matthew and Luke teach a *norm* of nonviolent love of enemies, and that all other New Testament material provides one voice in support of said norm (p. 329):

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 (p. 332).

Wow!

Then Hays asks the one question most frequently posed in response to his summary of the New Testament: What about the Old Testament witness? He responds in some detail, but the gist is this:

If irreconcilable tensions exist between the moral vision of the New Testament and that of particular Old Testament texts, the New Testament vision trumps the Old Testament (p.336).

He lets none of us calling ourselves “Christian” off the hook:

The vocation of nonviolence is not exclusively an option for exceptionally saintly individuals, nor is it a matter of individual conscience; it is fundamental to the church’s identity and *raison d’être* [reason for existence]... The church is called to live as a city set on a hill, a city that lives in light of another wisdom, as a sign of God’s coming kingdom... [I]f we ask the larger question about the vocation of the community, the New Testament witness comes clearly into focus: the community is called to the work of reconciliation and—as a part of that vocation—suffering even in the face of great injustice. (p. 337).

Ouch!

A little later, he speaks to the issue of *realpolitik*: or how *practical* is this, Mr. Yoder?:

If we fail to read the New Testament texts on violence through the lens of *new creation*, we will fall into one of two opposing errors: either we will fall into a foolish utopianism that expects an evil world to receive our nice gestures with friendly smiles, or we will despair of the possibility of living under the “unrealistic” standards exemplified by Jesus. But if we do read the texts through the lens of *new creation*, we will see that the church is called to stand as God’s sign of promise in a dark world. Once we see that, our way, however difficult, will be clear (pp. 338 & 339).

He notes further that:

(In this respect the New Testament is quite remarkable within the world’s literature.) (pp. 339 & 340)

And again, in direct response to *realpolitik* from the perspective of the cross:

The truth about reality is disclosed in the cross: God’s power is disclosed in weakness. Thus, all who are granted to see the truth through Jesus Christ will perceive the world through the lenses of the Beatitudes and the strange narrative of the Apocalypse, in which the King of kings and Lord of lords is the slaughtered Lamb. The power of violence is the illusory power of the Beast, which is unmasked by the faithful testimony of the saints (p. 340).

The nonviolence of the Cross, Hays argues, is ultimate *realpolitik*: the final reality of all creation.

Considering other voices in the Christian West's history, Hays writes:

This is the place where New Testament ethics confronts a profound methodological challenge on the question of violence, because the tension is so severe between the unambiguous witness [for peace] of the New Testament canon and the apparently countervailing forces of *tradition, reason, and experience* (p. 341).

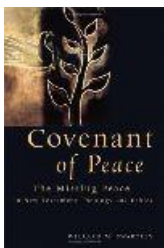
In consideration of each of these three “countervailing forces”, the writer carefully nudges us back towards the New Testament text as normative.

Hays' nearly final words in the chapter are searing:

One reason that the world finds the New Testament's message of peacemaking and love of enemies incredible is that the church is so massively faithless. On the question of violence, the church is deeply compromised and committed to nationalism, violence, and idolatry. (pp. 343 & 344).

I discussed Hays at such length, since I wanted to put the case home that there is *no biblical warrant for supporting Christian resort to violence at the personal level, or in support of the state's doing our dirty work for us through war against our international enemies such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, or retributive violence and capital punishment against our domestic enemies such as violent youth offenders and gang members.* Lest we forget, and think otherwise.

There is, on the contrary, one New Testament response to our enemies that Jesus gives: “*Love your enemies*”. In Luke's Gospel, the passage goes on, picked up by Saint Paul in Romans 13, and just like the Matt. 5 Sermon on the Mount, “*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also... Do to others as you would have them do to you* (Luke 6:27 – 31).” Where are there exception clauses anywhere in the New Testament? And to put the point home, Jesus caps it off with a reprise: “*But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful* (Luke 6:35 – 36).” Lest we forget, negative and positive reciprocity – *payback* of any kind! – are rejected by Jesus.



Another massive study I *must* mention is *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* by Mennonite theologian Willard Swartley:

[T]his volume is something much more [than] just an overgrown dictionary article on *eirene* [peace] in the New Testament, *it is nothing less than a comprehensive theology of the New Testament presenting peace as the heart of the gospel message and the ground of the New Testament's unity* (“The

heart of the gospel”, Richard Hays, *The Christian Century*, May 01, 2007, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=3329>). What Swartley emphasizes throughout this most remarkable recent study of the New Testament material, lest we forget, is the *active peacemaking* we are all called to as Jesus followers.

A Note About Reading the Bible

I drew on the New Testament at length because more than any other book in the church's history, this one has guided Christians' understanding of how to live in the world. Some would treat the New Testament like members of *The Jesus Seminar* do, as a document to go behind the curtain to get at what is *really* going on. This is not unlike Newtonian science: ever trying to understand the *mechanics* behind the scenes of the nature of things. What if however, as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe argued, the *real* thing is in fact what one experiences and observes straightforwardly in the *phenomena* of nature – or of the Bible – itself? This in fact is central theme of Luke Johnson's crisp *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*. This is a *phenomenological* way of doing science. I suggest, Is this not a far more efficacious and satisfying way of studying nature and the Bible? If our heads are forever thrust *behind the scenes*, preoccupied with the mechanics of things, perhaps like the proverbial ostrich's head stuck in the sand, we'll end up seeing very little and marveling at less. What if, rather than peering very long behind the scenes, as Shakespeare wrote, paraphrased, we discover after all that *The play's the thing wherein to catch the conscience of the king*? And of all humanity? And that *play* is the phenomenon of the New Testament frontally encountered.

Students of students of nature and of the Bible rightly observe that there are endlessly evolving theories of the *mechanics* of science and of the Bible. They are interesting no doubt, and serve a limited purpose. But if one *really* wants to get at the truth of the New Testament, forget about all the mechanics. Go read and ponder, and allow its truth to penetrate and infiltrate until one is overwhelmed by the sheer power and beauty – and impossible challenge of living out Christ in one's life! The New Testament is a collection of hot potatoes one cannot hold in the hands for very long, as the Hebrews text claims:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb 4:12).

Once a lay Catholic theologian was interviewed about reaction to (for some) Martin Scorsese's controversial film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on a novel written by Nikos Kazantzakis. I remember watching her laugh when asked if she would encourage her students to see the movie. She said something like: "Of course! I encourage my students to read and watch *anything* about Jesus they come across! But then I tell them, '*If you really want to get blown away, go read the New Testament and meet Jesus firsthand!*'"

Nonviolence: The History of a Dangerous Idea



Mark Kurlansky in a book entitled *Nonviolence* discerned twenty-five lessons from "The History of a Dangerous Idea" (the book's subtitle), a few of which I'll cite here:

3. Practitioners of nonviolence are seen as enemies of the state.
4. Once a state takes over a religion, the religion loses its nonviolent teachings.
6. Somewhere behind every war there are always a few founding lies.
8. People who go to war start to resemble their enemy.
16. Violence does not resolve. It always leads to more violence.
23. Violence is a virus that infects and takes over.

25. The hard work of beginning a movement to end war has already been done.

The dominant observation I made in reading the book is that nonviolence/peacemaking has been with the church since its inception. We often hear that the Quakers and the Mennonites are the historic peace churches. In one way this is true – since the 16th century Protestant Reformation. But church history began 15 centuries before that, and there has been a peace tradition throughout. More encouraging, there has been such a tradition in non-Christian parts of the West.

Mark Kurlansky's book does an excellent job of succinctly highlighting that long history, lest we forget or do not know. History is only beneficial if we learn from its mistakes. *Violence* is the *ultimate mistake* of human existence, personal or state. The Bible has a preferred word: *sin*.

He mentions groups and leaders including from the entire early church era until the fourth century; the Cathars/Albigensians considered heretics in the 12th century; and similarly the 12th century Waldensians whom the Cathars influenced; the Taborites or Hussites of the 15th century; Anabaptism that emerged in the 16th century; the Quakers who appeared in the 17th century; non-Christian groups such as the 19th century Cherokee nation that ended up completely betrayed and deported by the United States; the 19th century Maori of the South Pacific; 20th century non-Christian Jesus-follower Mahatma Gandhi and Christian Martin Luther King Jr.

Kurlansky does a superb job of reading Jesus and his initial followers non-violently, observing: "The early Christians are the earliest known group that renounced warfare in all its forms and rejected all its institutions (*ibid*, p. 21)." John Howard Yoder once told me that no theologian of repute had ever disagreed with his reading of Jesus as nonviolent in response to his *The Politics of Jesus*. For all that, Mahatma Gandhi said: "It seems everybody but Christians knows Jesus was nonviolent". Theologian Paul Anderson stated, "It is a great irony of history that the Cross, symbol of the ultimate triumph of peaceful means to peaceful ends, has been used as a standard in battle." This is in fact enormous *understatement*.

Something obviously happened on the way to those following what originally was called *The Way* – The Way of Peace: Christians unthinkably began endorsing and embracing the violence of the state. A superb book on this is Alistair Kee's *Constantine Versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology*. Fourth and fifth century Saint Augustine of Hippo was the brilliant theologian who began to proclaim the possibility of killing one's enemies, totally prohibited by Christ as most knew before Constantine. Augustine contradicted this, saying it was fine and even mandated, as long as it was done with an *inner* motivation of high-minded love for the enemy. All I can say is: *try it out sometime!* Think of your worst enemy, then conjure up love for him as you thrust him through with a spear, cut off his head, put a bullet to his heart, bomb his village, incinerate a whole city with a nuclear bomb... During my six months' sabbatical at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, last year, I in part plunged into a reading of Augustine on his arguably most *twisted* bequeathal to Western Christianity: *the "just war" theory*.

Don't really try to do what I just suggested: despatch your enemy with love in your heart! For the state takes a dim view of it, in fact arrogates sole right to itself of doing violence through

capital punishment and waging war. *It is precisely here where lies the rub: Jesus and the New Testament nowhere give that right to the state!* For the state to claim that right is precisely where it is the ultimate addict, totally under the control of the narcotic of power of life and death over whomever it claims should die.

A Chinese teacher named *Mozi* lived from about 470 to 390 BC, and challenged Confucianism for its proviolent establishment ways. He wrote a brilliant piece about state addiction to power:

To kill one man is to be guilty of a capital crime, to kill ten men is to increase the guilt ten-fold, to kill a hundred men is to increase it a hundred-fold. This the rulers of the earth all recognize and yet when it comes to the greatest crime – waging war on another state – they praise it!

It is clear they do not know it is wrong, for they record such deeds to be handed down to posterity; if they knew they were wrong, why should they wish to record them and have them handed down to posterity? [Such as again this November 11 Remembrance Day ceremonies.]

If a man on seeing a little black were to say it is black, but on seeing a lot of black were to say it is white, it would be clear that such a man could not distinguish black and white. Or if he were to taste a few bitter things [and] were to pronounce them sweet, clearly he would be incapable of distinguishing between sweetness and bitterness. So those who recognize a small crime as such, but do not recognize the wickedness of the greatest crime of all – the waging of war on another state – but actually praise it – cannot distinguish right and wrong. So as to right or wrong, the rulers of the world are in confusion.

I would rather say they are *addicts to the most powerful narcotic known to humanity: power*. Kurlansky observes:

By the seventh century it was already an old pattern: the religious doctrine of peace meets the power politics of state, the rules are bent for the “just war,” and once the first few doses are administered the state becomes an addict that will tell any lie to get its narcotic. War is simply the means. The real narcotic is power. As Hungarian writer György Konrád said of the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1980s, “Men can invent few libidinous fantasies more enjoyable than those of world domination.” The African-American poet Langston Hughes called the leading nations “the nymphomaniacs of power.” (*ibid*, p. 35)

Kurlansky concludes his book thus:

The early-twentieth-century French novelist Anatole France wrote: “War will disappear only when men shall take no part whatever in violence and shall be ready to suffer every persecution that their abstention will bring them. It is the only way to abolish war.” And as William Penn said in the seventeenth century, “Somebody must begin it.”

One of the greatest lessons of history is that somebody already has (*ibid*, p. 182).

We Christians believe Jesus is *That Somebody*. Richard Hays concludes his study thus:

If we live in obedience to Jesus' command to renounce violence, the church will become the sphere where the future of God's righteousness intersects—and challenges—the present tense of human existence. The meaning of the New Testament's teaching on violence will become evident only in communities of Jesus' followers who embody the costly way of peace (*ibid*, p. 344).

In this church fellowship alone, we know lots of models. We need to again *today*, this *now* day of our salvation, recommit to live out the *then* peace-full consummation of all history! *Lest we forget*. And as our MCC buttons say: *To remember is to work for peace!*

Amen!

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