

The Consequences of Being Human

The Incarnation is widely associated with Christmas. But the Word did not become flesh for one day or season only. In these talks we consider the risk which God took in being one of us and one with us in Jesus.

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Tuesday: Troubled by Religion

On each of the three weekdays which precede Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, I am reflecting on a feature of Jesus' life, evident in his three year ministry and notable in the last days before the cross. My intention is not to detract from the singularity of Jesus' passion and death, but rather to see that as the inevitable conclusion to a life and ministry which had been controversial and threatening, particularly to those who held power and authority in civil and religious life.

Yesterday we considered how Jesus was 'touched by pain.' His well-attested healing ministry was a blessing to many, but an annoyance to people who would have perceived that his style of healing, the occasions on which it happened and the people who benefited from this ministry did not accord with traditional expectations. In this connection, on the Monday of Holy Week, we recalled Jesus' compassion when he healed the lame, the crippled and the blind in religious precincts, to the great chagrin of the priests.

Now it is Tuesday.

The large crowd was listening to him with delight. As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

Mark 12. 37b-44

We cannot be certain that this passage from Mark's Gospel pertains to incidents which happened during Holy Week. But each of the Gospel writers have ensured that between Jesus' arrival into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and his betrayal on Maundy Thursday there are conversations, disputes, arguments recorded as Jesus is confronted with the hostility of various factions in the religious establishment.

Indeed, if we look at the structure of chapter twelve in Mark's Gospel, we see three different groups of religious dignitaries questioning him. First there are the Pharisees (verses 13-17); then come the Sadducees (verses 18-27); and finally the scribes (verses 28-32). The first group – the Pharisees -he rebuffs so effectively that Mark notes 'his reply left them completely taken aback.' The second group, the Sadducees, find that he deftly dismantles their hypothetical conjecture regarding who will marry whom in heaven. But because his third questioner, a Scribe, shows a fond affection for Scripture, Jesus offers him a word of encouragement.

At the end of these interrogation sessions, Mark notes that, 'Nobody dared put any questions to him.'

Jesus then speaks with the crowds, berates the hypocrisy of his religious critics, and honours the generosity of a poor widow who, as compared to her financial superiors, clearly knew what sacrificial giving meant.

Three Strands in Religion

Any global religion has three strands to it:

The Local Community... which, in the Christian faith, could be a church, a chapel, a meeting hall or a room in a house. It is where the faith is expressed in a communal setting for the mutual support and encouragement of believers.

The Denomination... which has an organisational structure, more or less hierarchical, which deliberates on doctrine, discipline, church life and practice. Hence we have Roman Catholics, Quakers, Greek Orthodox, Primitive Baptists each with a different culture and organisational structure.

The Faith... This is the understanding of what people believe about the nature and purpose of God, and how that affects the way they express their belief and practise their faith.

Each of these has its own idiosyncrasies, advocates and critics, and sources of blessing and frustration.

The Local Community

The local church community usually meets in a physical building, pride in which can sometimes be all-consuming. And the congregation may have a strong sense of its identity, so much so that the word 'change' is regarded as anathema. And most of us will know of disputes in congregations when alterations to the fabric were proposed, the use of instruments other than the organ was suggested, or a merger with another church was on the cards.

Sometimes I ask people in a congregation to indicate the number of changes that have happened in the last fifty years. Inevitably a cynic will say, 'Oh this will not take long.' But then we begin to enumerate them, everything from the inclusion of women in leadership to the abolition of pew rents or (in the case of Reformed Christians) the celebration of seasons like Advent. Once I have them all written up, I ask which of these changes came in to applause and loud Hallelujahs. Usually none of them. I then ask which of the changes they would like to reverse, and often it is again none of them. Local churches can be frustrating, especially those who label themselves 'protestant.' They have a genetic need to protest.

The Denominations

Denominations can be equally querulous.

Most of them result from schisms within a previous denomination. Thus the Methodists and the Salvation Army devolved from the Church of England. The Free Church and the Reformed Presbyterians devolve from the Church of Scotland. Both of these 'mother' churches were formed at the reformation because of schisms within the Roman Catholic Church.

Different denominations may have their own practices regarding, for example, who may be a leader, how often holy communion is celebrated, whether baptism is by total immersion of adults or sprinkling water on children, whether one has to testify to an experience of being born again, whether divorced persons can be married in church premises.

And the denominations may also favour particular theological emphases – the priesthood of all believers for Quaker and Reformed Christians, the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the seven sacraments for Roman Catholics, the gift of glossolalia (speaking in tongues) for Charismatic churches.

The Faith

And then there is the faith which, in Christian communities, finds its source in the Holy Scriptures, the tradition of the Church, and the reasoned conviction of believers.

Theology is the word which we use to codify what we believe about God and the purposes of God. In the main, theology derives from a reading of the Bible. But though all Christians and all denominations have access to the same source-book, this does not mean that unanimity of belief abounds. And every era in the history of the Christian church has witnessed theological disagreements based on different readings of scripture.

The history of many denominations in the USA provides interesting reading regarding their attitude to slavery. Indeed several denominations split in two with one side claiming that the Bible endorsed slavery as a God-given practice and the other saying it was antithetical to a faith which proclaimed the equality of all made in God's image. Similar doctrinal battles occurred in South Africa when black and coloured theologians dared to question the belief of the Dutch Reformed Church that, based on texts in Genesis, apartheid was consonant with Biblical teaching.

The Sometimes Unholy Trinity

The local church, the denominational culture and the faith ... these three things have bound people to each other and also created hostility among believers since in the early days of the faith Peter had to decide whether or not to accept a Roman centurion as a committed believer (Acts chapter 10).

When one looks at the history of the Christian era, there is much to celebrate as well as bemoan. We celebrate that Christianity brought peacemaking to Scotland under Columba, but we bemoan that it brought hostility to Jews and Muslims in Spain at the time of the Inquisition. We celebrate that Christianity enabled the development of literacy all over the world, but we bemoan that, often riding alongside the imperial ambitions of European nations, it endorsed the slaughter of countless natives in South America. We celebrate that the Christian Gospel declares God's free grace for all, but we bemoan that many people have been made to understand that grace comes with conditions.

And we are aware that whether it be the local church, or the preferred denomination or the dominant theology, people in positions of responsibility in all of these three spheres have sometimes given into their basest desires, and misused the power entrusted to them to hurt, humiliate and even demonise others, or to manipulate the system for their personal gain.

The Experience of Jesus

Jesus never entrusted to his followers either the promise or the model of the 'perfect' church, but rather bore the pain of religious intolerance. We saw that yesterday when we noted the consternation Jesus caused by healing in religious precincts on the sabbath. But let us look at more evidence of the consternation he caused.

Consider, for example:

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- A Jesus went into the synagogue in Nazareth, and read from Isaiah's prophecy about the Spirit of God giving sight to the blind and proclaiming good new to the poor. Then he sat down and said, 'Today, in your hearing, this text has come true.' There was general approval. The congregation was so impressed by his eloquence that people asked, 'Is this really Joseph's son?' But after he had talked about how a prophet is never accepted in his own country, they rose up, dragged Jesus out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which it was built, meaning to hurl it over the edge.
Luke 4:14-30 abbreviated
- B The Pharisees and scribes questioned Jesus, 'Why do your disciples not conform to the ancient traditions, but eat food with unwashed hands?' He answered, 'How right Isaiah was when he prophesied about you hypocrites with these words: 'This people pays me lip-service, but their heart is far from me.' You neglect the commandment of God in order to maintain the tradition of men.'
Mark 7: 1-8
- C While Jesus was teaching in the temple the scribes and the Pharisees brought to him a woman who was caught in the act of adultery. They asked if he would have her stoned, as Moses had required in the Law. Jesus invited the one who was guiltless to throw the first stone. They went away, one by one, the eldest first.
John 8: 1-11
- D There was a large crowd listening eagerly when Jesus said, 'Beware of the scribes who love to walk up and down in long robes and be greeted respectfully in the street, to have the chief seats in synagogues and places of honour at feasts. Those who eat up the property of widows, while for appearance' sake they say long prayers, will receive a severe sentence.'
Mark 12: 37-40
- E Jesus said, 'No slave can serve two masters; for either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and hate the second. You cannot serve God and Money.' The Pharisees who loved money, heard all this and scoffed at him.
Luke 16: 13-14
- F Jesus said, 'Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces; you do not enter yourselves, and when others try to enter you stop them.'
'Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You pay taxes on mint and dill and cumin; but you have overlooked the weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy and good faith.'
Matthew 23: 13 &23
- G The Pharisees were astonished at Jesus' teaching: 'How is it,' they said, 'that this untrained layman has such learning?' Jesus replied, 'Whoever chooses to do the will of God will know whether my teaching comes from God or is merely my own. Anyone whose teaching is merely his own seeks his own glory. Didn't Moses give you the law? Yet not one of you keeps it. Why are you trying to kill me?' The crowd answered, 'You are possessed! Who wants to kill you?'
John 7: 15-20
- H After Jesus had enabled a man born blind to receive sight, he was confronted by the Pharisees who had claimed that the man's blindness was the result his own or his parent's sin. Jesus said, 'It is for judgement that I have come into this world - to give sight to the blind and to make blind those who see. Some Pharisees who were present asked, 'Do you mean that we are blind?' 'If you were blind,' said Jesus, 'you would not be guilty, but because you claim to see, your guilt remains.'
John 9: 39-41
- I The high priest asked Jesus, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' 'I am,' said Jesus, 'and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Almighty and coming with the clouds of heaven.' Then the high priest tore his robes and said, 'You have heard the blasphemy.'
Mark 14: 61-64

Jesus and the Local Community

For Jesus, the local place of worship is important; he teaches, preaches and heals in local synagogues. And he teaches in the Temple, the cathedral of Judaism, though in many instances not to the delight of the listeners.

The experience in his home synagogue should have been enough to put him off. People admire his voice; they probably say to each other that he looks like his mother. But the eloquence with which he speaks makes them wonder if he is Joseph's son. And when they hear what he has to say, they are so outraged by it that they – his fellow Nazarenes – make the first direct assassination attempt on his life. But this doesn't put him off, neither this occasion nor the clashes he has with synagogue officials who object to him healing on the sabbath.

His purpose, even in the local congregation is to introduce people to the bigger God who has been eclipsed by the yoke of restrictive and sometimes punitive religion. In the instance of the fracas in his home synagogue (*Luke 4: 14-30*), Jesus did not spout heresy from the pulpit. If we recall the incident, it begins (14-22) with people admiring his eloquence in reading from Isaiah's prophecy. (They then become slightly uneasy when he alludes to how the congregation, aware of his healing ministry in another region of Galilee, anticipate that he might show his skill in his hometown (23). But they become outraged when, using two instances in recorded history (24-29), he shows that God does not always choose to favour those who think they are the 'chosen' people.

Jesus is not only opening people's eyes to a God who is not a tribal deity, a patron saint of their faith, but to God whose grace extends to all people. More than this, and equally offensive, Jesus suggests that the purposes of God are not simply enshrined in a sacred text, but revealed in his person. He is challenging the assumption that God is the object of speculation, by declaring that God is best known through a personal relationship which he, Jesus the local boy, can initiate.

Theologians love speculations, but God favours relationship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer realised this transition when he indicated that *the* religious question is not 'What is God like?' but 'Who is this man, Jesus?' Decades later, this was echoed by the Brazilian Liberation Theologian, Leonardo Boff:

To really comprehend who Jesus is,
one must approach him
as one touched by and attached to him.

And there is an echo of it in the poem 'Agnus Dei', the last section of RS Thomas's 'Mass for Hard Times':

No longer the Lamb,
but the idea of it.
Can an idea bleed?
On what altar
does one sacrifice an idea?

It gave its life
for the world? No
it is we who give our life
for the idea that nourishes us
itself on the dust of our veins...

Jesus and the Religious Denomination

Jesus does not avoid the local community, even if it might prove hostile. But it is the denomination, the religious culture, which is more of a battle for him. He has to deal with an inflexible system of Pharisees and Sadducees and Scribes and Priests and High Priests and Elders. His difficulty with them is not primarily that they disagree with him. It is that he is a threat to their power.

The Priests have the power to ban people from the Temple.
The Sadducees dispute anything – such as the resurrection – which is not contained in the law.
The Pharisees police public and private behaviour and have no compunction in telling people that they are sinful.

The Scribes held positions of authority in justice and education and their word was law, because they studied the law.

These four groups did not always get on with each other, and they tended to stay aloof from the majority of the population and could make life miserable for them by levying taxes which people could not pay, or condemning women for alleged immoral behaviour knowing that women could not defend themselves in court.

Wherever people interact with each other, power is part of the equation. And wherever holding power is coated with a religious veneer, those who wield power can have a carte blanche hold over believers. The incidence of clerical sex abuse bears eloquent witness to this. But woe betide anyone who confronts such religious megalomaniacs or dares to call them hypocrites.

And yet Jesus does:

He berates the Pharisees all through the Gospels for their cruelty to the poor (see B&D), their twisted interpretation of God's will (C) and their hypocrisy in expecting, in other people, a level of adherence to laws they themselves never attain (E & F).

The encounter Jesus has with the Pharisees in conjunction with him healing a man born blind (*John 9: 39-41*) is particularly noteworthy. They have no compassion for this man; they are unwilling to believe how he has been healed, and they vigorously protest that his blindness was brought out by his personal iniquity or the sin of his parents. And Jesus, in one of his most forensic responses to them, suggests that it is not the man born blind who cannot see, but those who claim to see and know everything are the ones who are interminably myopic.

Just as with his home congregation, he is challenging their understanding of God and God's word. He is allowing theology to determine behaviour, rather than have conventional respectability be rooted in a selective use of Scripture. God's purpose is not to ensnare fallible people in petty and sadistic legalism monitored by imperious religious lieutenants. God wills a liberation from humanly designed fatuous religious restraints.

God will not condemn a defenceless woman whom men accuse of adultery in the absence of any proof or a male co-accused.

God will not belittle the offering of two copper coins by a poor widow; God will regard that as an act of generosity far surpassing what her wealthy detractors would ever make.

God will not be enshrined in watertight theologies designed and policed by a religious elite. God will be known best by those who do God's will.

'Why do you want to kill me?' Jesus asks

No wonder they wanted to kill him.

Points to think about:

- **What is the difference between the questions 'What is God like?' and 'Who is this man, Jesus?' Try answering them for yourself, and see what the different answers are like.**
- **Do you recognise the picture of a church community that resists change? Try to exercise John suggests: think of all the changes that have happened in your church community over the last fifty years (or however long you can remember). Which of these would you want to change back?**
- **Because church buildings are closed at present, people have been unexpectedly freed from most of the usual ways that they express their religious identity. New ways are being found. What have you been learning in this sudden and radical change?**