

BACK TO THE BAPTIST

A Sermon for Sunday, July 15, 2018

St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC

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Our summer story-telling returns to the life of John the Baptist, but to a sordid episode for sure, his violent death. Having celebrated his birth at the end of June, our Gospel narrator today chronicles the collusion between an infuriated lover and a spineless political puppet.

While some will plead for a happier and lighter theme for the ices of summer, the text is indeed before us and deserves our attention. Here we see the worst of humanity on display, itself the subject of much visual and musical, operatic art. Beyond the Gospel story, and in our own time, we could look to Cambodia's killing fields, or to Auschwitz and Birgen Belsen, or to the blood-soaked schools and cities of the US, or closer to home to Toronto, Vancouver and even Kamloops. On media screens and in our streets, violence is part of daily life for more folks than we might imagine.

We shout to God and to each other for an end to such bloodshed; and yet, there is no relief in sight. Whether Syria, South Sudan, the Congo—and other sources of refugee plight and disruption—those securities most of us enjoy are in short supply in many places. If we probe for a reason, we might name amongst other forces: income disparity; intergenerational trauma (Northern Ireland is again in the news); traditional rivalries; jealousy; unrequited love and physical threat as violence generators. Returning to the Gospel, Mark takes up his story immediately following the “mission of the twelve:”

So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

And Herod felt threatened . . . again! He locked John up and hoped he would go away (knowing that he had a passionate following). Amidst what was likely a bacchanalian orgy, he makes promises he must fulfill; the women about him conspire and he colludes. John is beheaded for no reason beyond personal honour. Life is cheap it seems, here and elsewhere. And the ministry and martyrdom of John is completed.

Back to the question, why violence? I must first say that I am not a pacifist; I am however deeply opposed to violence as a social change agent. I myself would certainly defend property, people and projects, but would not myself know how to muster and express lethal force. The question for me is what drives change—the elimination of opponents? Intimidation arising through use of lethal force? The expression of fear-based anger? I know it seems like white-privileged naivety, but I still argue for collaboration and conversation in all instances.

I remember watching the movie Romero while at Seminary, it was one of those hold-on-to-your-stomach experiences. Recently returned from El Salvador, Carl Pentilchuk brought these memories back to life for me last week. Bishop Oscar Romero was elected as a “safe” candidate, one who would not rock the boat as the right-wing death squads intimidated and, in many cases, murdered opponents in order to keep a rich and powerful elite secure and protected. By refusing violence as business-as-usual in El Salvador, and by proclaiming love as the only legitimate way to live, he died a martyr’s death. In the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus spent his last night before capture we hear these words:

Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. (Matt 26:32)

In this instances, Jesus is a pacifist. His response begs the question: What is an appropriate response to violence? Certainly not denial, or minimization, or toleration, or more violence. I stand with many of my colleague cathedral deans in the US who take every opportunity to invite gun reform and the de-escalation of power-based debate.

It seems to me, more than ever that we likely need a new language of gratitude. And today's text from Ephesians certainly provides a fine response. Violence including murder attempts to dominate an opponent through restraint or physical elimination. Such domination eliminates any kind of vulnerability. Alternatively, to place ourselves in the "hands" of another, including God, and to express our delight in doing so, goes in a better direction:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.

He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.

With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

EPHESIANS 1:3-14