

Sunday, November 18th, 2018, Pentecost 26B

Readings: 1 Samuel 1: 4-20, Psalm 16, Hebrews 10:11-14, Mark 13:1-8

Crisis, Apocalyptic, and Violence

Introduction - Experience

Let me take you on a journey, no, two journeys where I have experienced apocalyptic language, apocalyptic world views. Both instances have been marked by social crisis. The first, in south America and second in north America. The South American version, arose from the crisis of the 17-year Pinochet Dictatorship. In this situation, the military government intentionally drew on apocalyptic biblical language to justify its repressive actions. Parallels were drawn between the warrior Judges of the Hebrew Bible and the 'good' General himself. The point was that government/military violence was God's violence; defending a Christian nation against left-wing atheistic communists. On the opposition side, for those who resisted the regime, there too, counter-violence was seen to have a sacred redemptive edge. Working as I was amid poor urban communities, I could not tell you how many young men from my congregation, I counselled not to join up with the resistance, how many young men, to whom I explained, that violence - neither of the state nor of the resistance, was sacred, was redemptive. The other journey was north America, post 9/11. Attacked by an apocalyptically inspired Islam; over months, the burgeoning, bubbling reaction in the country was of a quasi- apocalyptically inspired Christianity. Christian language was messily and disturbingly mixed with national security language. God was invoked at every turn, as America became more truculent, more bellicose about its mission to invade and 'democratize' the Middle East. More than once it was referred to as "a crusade", a "holy war".

What did I conclude from these experiences? The first conclusion I drew, was something that you have heard me say before, indeed recently: that we human beings are naturally sectarian, instinctively tribal. No matter how modern or sophisticated we claim we are, there remains a primitive clannishness to our individual and collective psyches: contemporary anthropology tends to confirm that view. The other conclusion I drew, was that religious/faith identity is quite capable of fuelling that sectarian, tribal, clannish disposition, furnishing it with a sacred legitimacy, making violence, when it comes to that, a positive, redemptive thing. It was Jonathon Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, who back in 2015, spoke of such violence as '*altruistic evil*'. In reference to the Paris attacks of November 13th, of that year, where 130 people were killed, at the hand of Islamic fundamentalists, he said

We need a term to define this deadly phenomenon that can turn ordinary, non-psychopathic people into cold blooded murderers of school children, aid workers, journalists and people at prayer. It is, to give it a name, 'altruistic evil': evil committed in a sacred cause, evil committed in the name of high ideals" (Tablet, June 13th, 2015, 13)

Sacks was careful, and wisely so, not to tar Islam *alone* with such a brush; for *he* knew only too well of Zionism's own erratic history, and *we* know as Christians, that we carry our own burden of altruistic evil, evil committed in a sacred cause: in the English speaking world, the perennial and relentless Irish Question, and more recently still in the Balkans, the holy genocide by sections of the Christian Serbs against ill-matched Bosnian Muslims.

The Gospel

So, if there is a something to this idea of the connection between apocalyptic language and sacred 'redemptive violence' - and I think there is - what does the New Testament say about apocalyptic? Clearly the Book of Revelation, otherwise called the Apocalypse of John, is a major consideration to any adequate answer, but we need to reserve that for a later discussion. It is to our Gospel reading today, Mark's so called "Little Apocalypse" that we need to turn.

What is it saying? Is there in this reading an enthusiasm for things apocalyptic? Is there any sense of an endorsement of the idea of sacred redemptive violence, of altruistic evil?

Let's us examine the reading in three stages: historical context, the comment of the disciples and then Jesus' response.

The Church community of Mark lived in dangerous times. Overwhelmingly Jewish, it faced internal division over the question of inclusion of non-Jews, of Gentiles. In the early Church, the question of inclusion or exclusion of people who were not Jews, ran like a fault-line through Christian communities. The exclusionists aligned themselves with the conservative camp whose hero was the apostle James. The inclusionists, progressives, lined-up with Paul. But there were other tensions which were ticking away, destabilizing the Church community from outside; not least, the increasingly difficult issue of the Jewish rebellion against Rome, which was gathering momentum. The American New Testament scholar, Ched Meyers, tells us that within Mark's Christian community, young men, Jewish Christians, were signing up for the resistance against Rome, animated, agitated by the apocalyptic language which was feeding Jewish passions.

It was this situation that leads to the discussion between Jesus and his disciples, who are Jewish nationalists. Things had not changed much between the time of Jesus and the time of Mark's community 30 years later. Messianic fervour, apocalyptic excitement had motivated the disciples as much as Mark's own community. Worked up by messianic fervour, Peter, James, John and Andrew are like precursors to the young war-like men of Mark's congregation. They come to Jesus speculating about the impending violent times upon them, that this is all God's work: that this is about sacred, altruistic violence.

But what of Jesus' response? It is like a cold-shower upon the hot enthusiasm of these disciples. Hosing down their theological frenzy, he tells them to get a grip on themselves. His message is this: this sort of language is always around, where God is seen as instigator of violent events. But, Jesus adds, "*me throesthe*" (μη θροεϊθη), often translated as "don't be alarmed", but carrying the sense of "don't take any imprudent, precipitous action". In short, Jesus has no enthusiasm for apocalyptic, for the naïve, feverish mixing of political violence with religious faith. Jesus is sceptical that human violence can be legitimately aligned with the sacred. In fact, his advice, and the advice of Mark 30 years later, is that it is not that God does not intervene in human history, but rather that he intervenes through the cross, through crucifixion, through becoming the victim of apocalyptic violence, not its firebrand, not its instigator. For Jesus, and for Mark, God's intervention is about love and only love. Love debunks apocalyptic.

In our clip, this is the brilliance of the closing scene. As Bobby faces the ultimate crisis of his life, the surviving but soon to die member of the Andrea Gail speaks to his beloved Christina and makes the ultimate Christian confession.

"There is only love Christina, only love".

There is only love, only love.

Commented [G1]: