

Lent 4C, March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019

Readings: Joshua 5:9-12, Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

## Family Politics

### Introduction

Christians understand Lent as that time where the focus lies upon the approaching sacrifice of Jesus – located in Holy Week. The problem has been, that we read the texts with little understanding of the real-life historical dynamics that led to Jesus' death – and ultimately his resurrection. Recent modern biblical scholarship has corrected that deficit, through an energetic analysis of the weight of the reality with which Jesus had to contend. To that end, each week, I have **attempted** to bring to light, those forces, powers or institutions with which Jesus had to deal – and which ultimately were involved in his execution. The Temptations presented three of those powers, three of those institutions that sought to seduce and destroy Jesus: the power of economics (bread); the power of politics (abasing himself to Satanic power to inherit the earth); and the power of religious spectacle, as the crowds were to “oooh-and aaah” at the sight of Jesus casting himself from the Temple pinnacle. Since that first week of Lent, we have had cause to revisit the power of politics (through the lens of nationalism) and the power of religion (through the lens of moralistic-exclusionary judgments that are closely connected with retributive violence). In sum then, we have learnt that for the New Testament, the struggle of Jesus is against institutions that have lost their way, against institutions that have become introvertedly self-serving. (Wow, there is something very contemporary about that; is there not?)

Today, we turn to another power or institution – one which is not explicitly mentioned in the Temptations, but one which *does* get ‘a lot of press’ in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament: it is the family. One of the things that has perplexed me over the years, is the way in which conservative Christian teaching has idealised the family. Yet, when we turn to the Bible, we find that many of the core conflicts that are reported, are in fact family ones: Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Sarah and Hagar, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. Even Moses and Aaron have a patchy relationship. And then of course, Jesus himself, sees his own biological family as somewhat of a problem, as secondary, when compared with his “friends and followers”.

So, on balance, it seems that family, is as problematic and ambiguous as are the state and religion. The institution of family, can also lose its way, the institution of family can also become self-serving, the institution family can also be destructive of the broader community, and indeed, the kingdom values of compassion (*chesed*), and justice (*sedekah/mispat*), directed to the outsider.

Let's then examine the family: first through the lens of the film *Chocolat*, and then through the Gospel for today- the Prodigal; and then draw some conclusions.

### The Clip

***Chocolat* is a film about redemption.** In the clip, we pass through a number of scenes. The Count of Reynard, writing the sermon for the young priest, Pere Henri, making the point that Christian faith is all about morality – rather moralism, rules and regulations – which, not even he, can live up to. Then the Count's dawning realization of his own brokenness, as he finally accepts his humanity, gorging himself on the wonderful sensual chocolate in the shop window. And finally, the Easter sermon *rewritten* – the words of Pere Henri, “I do not want to talk about Jesus' divinity, but about his humanity”: the acceptance of faith as a path to living more humanely, generously, not more demandingly, self-righteously, impossibly.

In all of this, you would be right to see an acute criticism of religion that has been hijacked for purposes of bias, prejudice and rivalry: the eternal problem, as we saw last week. But in this

movie, you see also a critique of family: the way in which family has also been hijacked for purposes of bias, prejudice and rivalry, falling apart in misery and pain. Indeed, at the end, as we saw, Christianity, imaginatively understood and lived out, through the priest's sermon, leads to a rebirth of the family unit. Even the Count, finally relaxes enough to ask Caroline out – pointing to a new family. *Chocolat* is a film about redemption.

### **The Reading – the Prodigal**

Turning to the Prodigal, again we hear of redemption: that's the thrill of this compelling story. Let's register a few points:

**First, a point from the Ancient Near East: the context of the Old and New Testaments: in that time and that place well-to-do families were above all economic units.** Our quote from the Christian historian, Peter Brown, says it all. Families, like that of the Prodigal were in effect financial dynasties. Fabulous wealth was seen as a way of overcoming the limitation and discontinuity of death. It was the palpable fear and anxiety about human mortality, that drove these enterprises. Turning to the Hebrew Bible to confirm this, there is the extraordinary reading of Deuteronomy 21, where people like the Prodigal younger son, are damned because of the threat they constitute to family continuity

*“If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.” Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid.*

**Second, the act of demanding his share of the inheritance before time, is then, not just an act of self-centredness, but one that may put the economic competitiveness of the family business at risk.** The fury of the elder brother – loyal to family and economy, for they are one and the same – is extreme. He disowns his brother, even as the father – to his credit – insists that they are brothers.

**Third, that the parable as Jesus announces it, is nothing less than a reversal of the cultural, economic, and biblical tradition.** The Prodigal – who has made himself an outsider, who merits not just rejection, but execution, *is to be welcomed back, restored and honoured.* The point is not just about goodness, but rather, about Jesus' insight, made plain through Luke, that compassion (*chesed*) and justice (*sedekah* and *mispat*) do three things: resist the distinction between insiders and outsiders; expose the violence of human structures – social, political and economic – that create such a distinction – including the family; and insist that Christian communities live in a genuinely integrated way.

In Paul's words from his letter today to the Corinthians, mired, as they were in their own mutual exclusion...perhaps the sharpest most economic, social critique that has ever been offered in the New Testament...we Christians are a “new creation”! That is what we are. That is what we are called to become.

Amen