

Epiphany 6, Sunday, February 17th, 2019

Readings: Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1, 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, Luke 6:17-26

God's Culture

Introduction

On September 11th, 1973 – the first September 11th, as it is often called, the second being 9/11/2001 in New York – a military coup fell like a thunderclap upon a country that for some years had been in turmoil. It began with, as you have just seen, the attack upon the Presidential Palace – the “Moneda” – in order to force into submission, the then elected President of the Republic of Chile, Salvador Allende. Much has been said and written about that time, but two insights have stood ‘the test of time’. The first, is that the coup – violent as it was – indelibly marked and shaped the history of that country for the next 20 years, as it lived under dictatorship. In fact, still today, peoples’ lives have remained irreversibly effected by those events – Gilda’s own brother, lives in exile in Ecuador. The second, is that it was a cultural war, a war between historical, political and religious cultures; something that had been ‘on the boil’ for centuries. Right from the beginning of Spanish colonization, conflict between the possessors and the dispossessed – of the land and the means of production – had led to scandalous inequality, secured and maintained by the armed forces. The Church in this culture war between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, was trapped, having a foot in both camps. The Catholic Church, the strongest, during the post - coup years (1973-1990) was led ably by its bishops, and steered a competent and constructive course, based upon what was called a “theology of life”, grounded in the Bible, and directed toward a politics for human rights. That said, the bishops struggled to be heard. Many people – Catholic and Protestant – shaped their personal theology around their political and social inclinations and biases. The Bible became a weapon to be wielded against ‘enemy’ cultures, and biblical texts were trotted out to confirm a view that had already been arrived at through other means. The political right provided an interpretation of the Bible that supported the prevailing authoritarian dictatorial culture in play – often they would reach back to the Old Testament and the Book of Judges in particular, to normalize the violence. The centre-left on the other hand was more skilful in thinking biblically, and frankly had an easier time of it – as they assumed a critical reading of the times, which sat more naturally with biblical values. And here is my point: today’s reading, Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, was one of the biblical passages often studied, often drawn upon for its critical wisdom.

The Reading

So what was it about today’s reading - the potentially explosive passage in Luke’s Gospel – that was discovered? What was it, that taught progressive minded Christians, something about God’s culture over our own?

First, when Jesus pronounces the Sermon on the Plain, he does two things. He reaches, as we have already said these past weeks, back to the Biblical tradition, to the Hebrew commitment to Yahweh’s desire, Jubilee and its platform for freedom and equality for peoples. But this new piece – today’s reading – goes further – it is Jesus’ *own* interpretation of Jubilee. What we can say then, is this: that Jesus seeks to be faithful to the Hebrew Bible, but equally faithful to the times in which he lives. He reads both the Bible and the signs of the times; he reads with two eyes – one focused upon Scripture, the other focused upon the world around him.

Second, Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain is considerably more radical, deeper rooted than Jubilee. As I indicated earlier – referring to the comment of Brian Stoffregen – Jesus declares “blessed” (*makarioi*), the very people who much of Hebrew society had declared as cursed. For significant parts of the Hebrew Bible, the blessed were the prosperous, since not only were they affluent, but their affluence itself, was seen as an expression of God’s favour, God’s approval: both wealth and God’s consent to that wealth. We still have it today, the so called “theology of prosperity” drummed up by elements of Pentecostalism. It is clear – not only from this reading, but from

others – that Jesus does not see it that way. For Jesus, the elite in God's kingdom, the blessed ones, are those who are at the bottom of the heap of humanity, not the top.

Third - that is disturbing, that is a problem. God's culture appears distinctly different to most, if not all human constructions, no matter how we rationalize them. It is no wonder then, that the Church, embedded as it historically has been, as an influential player in mainstream society through the ages, has had real difficulty in coming to terms with *this* Jesus who pronounces the Sermon on the Plain. We have of course found ways around him: we have been over the centuries, nothing if not 'inventive'. On reading the Sermon on the Plain, there has arisen learned, scholarly avoidance of Jesus 'the obstacle', Jesus the one who scandalizes us. Let me list a few examples.

One 'creative' alternative, has been that this Sermon on the Plain is really only quarantined, limited to Christians. Directed to a church community in trouble, this sermon, we are told, is to help comfort *them*: a beleaguered Christian minority in a hostile world. It is apparently the Christians who are the blessed 'poor'. The problem, is that to diminish Jesus' proclamation to a small audience of Christians is to do no service to the Gospel at all. Constantly, Jesus addresses the world, not just the church.

Another alternative, has been to interpret the idea of the poor and poverty, romantically. In other words, poverty is blessed because it provides the poor with a particular advantage: the freedom of depending upon God alone, released from the complicating baggage of wealth. Apparently to be poor is a good thing. This is a tad disingenuous. In my experience, I have never seen wealthy people, Christians included, voluntarily surrender up their wealth in order to enjoy the benefits of poverty and dependence upon God. Poverty and the poor are not to be romanticized.

The third, alternative, has been to cast these words of Jesus concerning the poor who are blessed *now*, as the "spiritually poor", uncoupling it altogether from the idea of material reality. Again, there is no suggestion that this is what Jesus is saying. He seems clear that the poor are the poor! (*ptochoi*). They are the one whose backs are bent over, whose heads are ground into the sand. They are the ones who have things done *to* them.

Conclusions

What am I saying here? That we learnt in those intense times of dictatorship and serial injustice, that God's way of casting the world, God's culture, is frequently incompatible with our own inadequate, tainted versions. We learnt that our tendency as Christians – regardless of political colour - was to rationalize this incompatibility, by "bringing God to us" (on our terms), rather than by us "going to God" (on his).

Yet, it is precisely the yawning difference, the tension, between God's culture and our own, that we have seen today in the reading, that we need to keep uncomfortably and inconveniently alive. Otherwise the faith is cheapened and lost, weakened and corrupted, and we are deluded. The Sermon on the Plain, awakens us to the 'impossibly' radical nature of the Gospel. That is our guiding light, our beacon, our bellwether, as we attempt to build a new world **in God's image**.

