

Epiphany 7, Sunday, February 24th, 2019

Readings: Genesis 45: 3-11, 15, Psalm 37: 1-11, 39-40, Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50, Luke 6: 27-38

A Jubilee Ethics of Release from Blindness

Introduction

You must really wonder, why Popeye? That will become clear soon, but I do not want to begin there. Let us begin first with the Gospel reading for today, turn to Popeye, and then back to the reading: in other words, bible-reality-bible.

As I mentioned in the introduction to our service, this season of Epiphany – when the church is asked to think about its understanding of Christian mission to the world – is both rich and disturbing. Rich because of the themes within Luke’s Gospel, grounded in the Hebrew idea of Jubilee. Disturbing, because of the way in which Jubilee raises perpetual, inescapable, questions for Christian faith, about freedom and equality, in a world which struggles with both.

Let’s recall, the prescriptions of Jubilee with which we began some weeks ago when Jesus stood up in the synagogue to proclaim the “acceptable year of the Lord” They were, rest for the land – *the ecological component*; the cancellation of debt, where indebtedness becomes a real threat for social stability – *the finance component*; the liberation of slaves and slavery, both formal and informal, as a source of low-cost labour – *the social/class component*; and finally the redistribution of the land, so that assets, not just income, are spread broadly, not concentrated in few hands – *the wealth component*.

Today’s reading is both gift and problem. The gift is this: it talks about how to bring about the Jubilee, how to go about reforming community, society, in the interests of freedom and equality. The problem, is that we struggle to interpret this reading, to make sense of it. This is not new; it has been with us for centuries. So, let’s begin by understanding the problem of the interpretation of this reading.

The Struggle of Interpretation

The issue has been that the ethics seem impractical, impossible *in the real world*. What earthly good does it do “turn the other cheek”, to give the shirt off your back, to love those who make your life impossible, to show immeasurable mercy to the cruel? The philosopher, Karl Marx said a lot of things; some more helpful than others. One thing worth remembering, was his criticism of religion in general and Christianity in particular: namely that it can do no good, because it does not move in the real world, but in a world of fantasy – heaven. It is likely that he had this reading in mind when he made that comment. So, on the one hand, we have a body of ethics, which appear naïve, that appears to give-in to evil and injustice, rather than resist it. And on the other, it is precisely this historical sense of the ‘uselessness’ of Jesus’ rules for living, that led Christianity to structure an alternative: the church father, Augustine’s thought. As the Christian church became the glue that held the Roman Empire together, Jesus’ apparent ‘pacifistic’ teachings were problematic. Rome needed a religion that could defend its interests when needed, that could legitimate war, when necessary. Augustine did not disappoint, coming up with an alternative theological framework that did the job. Part of that was what is called the “Just War Theory” which still holds sway in international law. To that extent, Augustine’s work has been useful, but it is much more conservative than Jesus’ approach. In broad-brush strokes then, the view that Jesus’ ethical teachings were impractical in a changed world, led to an Augustinian alternative. Jesus’ ethics appeared naïve, while Augustine’s were probably altogether pragmatic.

Popeye – Violence that Redeems, that Gives Life

Let’s now turn to Popeye. That which stands out with Popeye – apart from his spinach – is the way the stories always give a positive spin to violence: violence repeatedly saves his girlfriend

Olive Oyl, violence always redeems the problem. No-one ever gains any insight or learns from the encounters. They never discuss their differences, because there is no need.

Communities, whole societies, subscribe to this. In fact, this ingrained belief in violence, carries historical weight, and mythical power. Looking back into the annals of the Ancient Near East, the creation story of the Babylonian Empire (*Enuma Elish*), which in form at least, parallels the biblical creation story, was all about violence as creative, state violence as renewing. Turning to my experience of the military dictatorships of Chile and El Salvador, during what were called the “Years of Exception”, state violence was seen as part of God’s will to ensure, to renew western order. It even had a name, “the national security state”. And of course, there are the communist regimes and histories of eastern Europe and Asia, where state violence was also enshrined.

It is in this world of violence as the norm, *not the exception*, that the Gospel passage before us, when carefully read, is extraordinarily important. What is it saying? Can we do better than much of Christian tradition has done, in interpreting it?

Back to the Gospel: Jesus’ Jubilee Ethics

To build the “acceptable year of the Lord”, to build Jubilee, includes, not just the goal, but also the way, the method. How we do it, must be consistent with the end in mind. To build justice – freedom and equality – through violence is not just contradictory, but impossible. So, may I make two points about this ethics of Jesus?

The first is this: that what marks Jubilee ethics, is the grace of generosity. This should be no surprise: it marks what the Gospel is all about. Just as God through Christ reaches out to us, takes the initiative in history, it is natural to understand that we are called to do the same. It is this generosity that shapes the idea of living in a non-reciprocal way: in other words, refusing to live *tid for tad*. Living in a spirit of reciprocity – good for good and bad for bad – was well accepted in the ancient world. This is what Jesus challenges and is summed up in Gandhi’s saying, “an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind”.

The second point is that this generosity is not naïve -the charge that is often laid against Jesus’ ethics. The saying concerning turning the other cheek, does not suggest that upon being slapped or attacked, we then simply grant another opportunity for the same. To live like this is masochistic, but also impossible when considered in a broad social context. Some people have suggested, that the offering of the other cheek is a sort of shaming of the abuser. That may be correct and the idea is to appeal to the abuser’s sense of fairness. That said, it is risky, because let’s face it, many would do it again and again without thinking twice. People abuse, injure and kill; and sleep well at night.

So, is something else going on here? Yes! The point here is the way in which the abused person challenges the abuser. How so? The situation is one where, the victim is slapped with a back-hander from the abuser: the sort of thing that a superior, a master would enact against a social inferior, a slave. It is all about power. Jesus’ advice, is to then turn the other cheek. In turning the face away, the master cannot use the back-hand again...the inferior’s nose is in the way. The left cheek then offers a perfect target for a sharp blow with the right fist: but – and here is the crunch – fist fighting in the ancient world, was only done between equals. In short, the social inferior, the slave, is challenging the master, claiming equality. It is as if he were to say, “I’m a human being, just like you. I will not be humiliated. I am your equal. I am a child of God. I won’t take it anymore”. Of course, the master can flog him...but everything has changed. Turning the cheek is not about resignation. It is pacifistic, but it courageously challenges the violence done, it challenges the violent system, in a way where, to quote Gandhi, “not everyone is left blind”.

This is the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, of Martin Luther King, of Steve Biko, of Sebastian Acevedo, of Oscar Romero. A Jubilee ethics in the hope of building a Jubilee world!