

Lent 3C, March 24th, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 55:1-9, 17-18, Psalm 63, 1 Corinthians 10:1-18, Luke 13:1-9

Hijacked

Introduction

Observation and experience tells us that religion is an ambiguous power in the world, an equivocal thing in human history. A cursory reading of any of the big three traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – tells us that each bears within it, capacity for life or for death, for goodness or for evil, for restoration or for retribution. Last week, we identified the power of the state and nationalism (Herod the fox), with which Jesus had to contend. Today, we hear about the power of religion and Jesus' adept response to it. Let me propose that we do a few things this morning, as we think together. First, let us begin with the film clip, we have just seen. Second, let us turn to the Gospel passage for today. And third, let us try to draw some conclusions.

Film Clip: Dead Man Walking

Matthew Poncellet has been found guilty of the brutal rape and murder of a young girl, Hope and her boyfriend. Having failed in an attempt to successfully appeal the death penalty, Sr Helen, visits Poncellet, establishing a pastoral relationship, as well as one where she is accepted by him as his spiritual advisor. Perhaps, naively, but nevertheless generously, she visits Hope's parents, who interpret, misinterpret her call as meaning that she – Sr Helen – has changed sides. As she gently explains that she will continue working with Poncellet, the anger builds and the final words, say it all: *"Wait a minute! If you really are sorry. If you really do care about this family, you'll want to see justice done for our murdered child. You can't have it both ways. You can't befriend that murderer, and expect to be our friend too. You brought the enemy into this house Sister. You better go!"*

This is a bare knuckles conversation! This is a heart-rending situation for all concerned. This is the worst of circumstances. Any of us with children can understand the response of Hope's parents, but as Christians we may also understand the ministry of Sr Helen. Faced with this "Solomonic problem", we do need to step-back and think. What is going on amid the glaring pain and anger? Let me make three observations!

First, the discussion about justice is difficult, because each interprets the idea quite differently.

For Hope's parents, justice is *retributive* - a life for a life. For Sr Helen, justice is *restorative*: first for Poncellet as she guides him to assume responsibility for his actions, prior to his execution; and then hopefully for everyone, as they embark upon a painful but necessary psychological and spiritual journey.

Second, there is in this discussion, the oblique but at times obvious use of religious language.

In other words, there is an unexplained sacred meaning layered upon these events; we are not just hearing a discussion about the murder of a girl and the pending execution of the murderer. There are concepts here about the metaphysical "*shoulds*": the need for violence against Poncellet – moral violence, sacred violence, sacrifice – so the 'books can be balanced', that some equity can come about. For Sr Helen, violence is seen differently – not as a metaphysical requirement from heaven to even things up, but as something that must be minimized. That the only way forward is for all to see themselves as *more* than the appalling circumstances into which they have been thrown.

Third, there is in the discussion a connection for Hope's parents, between human morality tied up with the requirement for retribution, and God's morality, which exists to punish evil. For Sr. Helen, however, there is a gap between these two moralities. Human systems may impose punishment, even death; but her insight is that God in Jesus, is more reluctant to be involved in the human process of judging and condemning. Summing it up then: the conflict between Hope's

parents and Sr Helen is about what justice means, about religiously sanctioned violence, and finally about the doubtful, dubious correlation between human moral judgments and God's

The Reading

Now to the Gospel reading! What stands front and centre in this reading is the interaction between the people and Jesus. The content of the discussion is fascinating and is about recent reported events. The first, apparently concerns violence of Roman soldiers upon Jews performing their religious duties in the Temple. The second is the collapse of a tower at Siloam – not far from the old walled city of Jerusalem – which killed eighteen people.

As good 'religious', faith abiding Jews, these people are anxious to make sense of the events. As good 'religious' Jews, they do so by over-laying those events with religious, sacred explanations. And what would they be? That in some way, these people were being punished for their sins. Automatically, axiomatically, religious faith becomes a means for measuring a division between human beings, between the good and the not so good. Automatically, axiomatically, religious faith makes God a participant in human moral judgments. God becomes co-extensive with our values, with our biases, prejudices and bigotry.

But Jesus' response to all this is interesting. He exposes this sort of religious mindset, for what it is. He rejects their illiberal, jaundiced view and explains that "things happen": that people *are murdered*, that towers *do fall*. And he adds, that connecting them with God is both unhelpful and false. Jesus completely de-sacralizes the events, removing any link between God and what has happened – it has nothing to do with God. But and here is the point – Jesus is more concerned with the response, the reaction, than he is with the events themselves. His warning is this: if we are caught up neurotically giving religious, sacred meanings to events such as those; then we will invariably get caught up in the world of reciprocal, retributive violence, of casting God, of painting God according to our own perceived interests, prejudices and anxieties. This is dangerous ground.

Some Conclusions

Jesus debunks this hijacked faith to which so many subscribe. This is hijacked faith. It is the faith of the childish who perceive God as the guarantor of order; as the one who ultimately holds things together through his holy violence. This is the faith of Hope's parents. It is not the faith of Sr Helen, nor the faith of Jesus. Nor can it be ours!

