

Reflection “They are us”

Rev Norman Wilkins

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Getting our heads around what was going on at the time of this dream of Peter's is very difficult to say the least; it was ever so complicated and the scholars who have looked into what was happening in the church at the time have revealed the enormous variety of beliefs and competition between different groups in the Christian scene of the time. It is made a whole lot more difficult by the fact that records going back to then are very partial and fragmented and the writers were not objective but were trying to make a point. Add to that the warfare and general chaos that reigned in Israel towards the end of the first century and beginning of the second means whatever I say may not represent the reality of the time, but I think if we are to pay any attention to this passage about Peter's dream about whatever God created was therefore clean, we do need to set it in some sort of context. In the simplest terms possible it may have been like this: Jesus was a Jew and he stayed in Israel and talked almost exclusively it seems to Jews. His aim seemed to be to get Judaism back to what it should have been.

He saw the error of the excessive emphasis on the letter of the Law, especially concerning the Sabbath. He saw that the Law existed to serve people, not the other way round and incidentally I believe all of Jesus' teaching can be summed up by the parables we call the Prodigal Son and The Good Samaritan and if that was the only bits of the Bible that were ever read it would serve us well.

Jesus actually used his common sense and compassion and if that meant that the Law of the time was shown to be an ass, so be it. That is a comment that I am prepared to make to today's fundamentalists who quote selected texts of the Bible to support what common sense and compassion shows to be out to touch with reality.

Anyway when Jesus' first followers who were also Jews started to talk to others about the Jesus Way they did so by and large of course in the synagogues, for that was where religious discussion, in fact most interaction occurred.

However at the time a lot of non-Jewish people were searching for answers to the big questions of life. There was so much going on that made people do this. Life was very cruel for lots of people, crucifixions, disease, enormous inequality, oppression by the Romans, superstition. For many people life was lived out in fear and suffering. Unlike today, people back then realised they needed religion to try of make sense of it all and give them hope. People then as now were not stupid, they thought about things, and they did not find the religions based on the Roman gods, or the Greek gods made any sense. There was a lot of

searching going on and Judaism was actually very attractive, for it made a whole lot more sense than most of the other stuff.

So lots of thinking non Jewish people were coming to the synagogues, listening, discussing and in lots of cases converting to Judaism. So they were rubbing shoulders with the first Christian missionaries, and many of them were attracted to the Way of Jesus and became Christian believers.

So to become followers of Jesus did those people need to convert to Judaism first or could they skip that and become Christians straight away? Was Christianity itself going to stay as a reforming movement within Judaism or was it going to break out on its own leaving Judaism behind?

To our simple understanding 2000 years later Paul converted people directly to Christianity and the original apostles back in Jerusalem like Peter stuck to converts becoming Jews first. This dream is saying that Peter changed his mind and non-Jews, gentiles, were quite acceptable as they were.

What followed seems to have been so typical of the time and illustrates my belief that humans have become by and large a whole lot nicer. There were of course Jews who accepted the Jesus way.

They were good believing Jews, circumcised, Sabbath observing Jews who also went along with what was said about Jesus, they accepted that Jesus was the Messiah, though I understand many of them wouldn't accept that Jesus was actually divine and though they accepted Matthew's Gospel, they were not happy with the first two chapters about his birth. We also know there was a "Gospel of the Hebrews"

Anyway these Jewish Christians tended to be rejected by their Jewish fellows and regarded as heretics by the non-Jewish Christians. There is a general word for them "Ebionites" which translates "poor ones". They sort of faded out of existence, but maybe some of their influence lives on, for Muhammad may have encountered the Ebonite version of Christianity for the Muslim beliefs about Jesus and the Hebrew prophets like Moses found in Islam look as if they could have been inherited from the Ebionite version of Christianity.

Just before I try to bring this up to date. Peter's challenge, the first Christians' challenge was very serious indeed. It amounted to saying that all that counted was allegiance to the Way of Jesus, and what was understood to be hugely important conditions like circumcision called for in the Hebrew Scriptures could be set aside.

The history of the Church, like the history of society actually has been repeated challenges to see things differently; and the Church hasn't done all that well in coping with them.

The history of the early church was for the best minds of the time to have all manner of beliefs. It was "if you can imagine it, some group believed it". Persecution became the order of the day.

The Roman society at the time seemed to be pretty laid back about religion, citizens hedged their bets and they did their religious thing to a selection of gods, it was no hassle whatsoever to offer sacrifice to the emperor, if he said he was a god, no problem. Offering a sacrifice at one of his altars was a whole lot less arduous than having to pay the taxes that he levied on you. But Christians were actually a thorn in society's side for Christians stuck to there being only their God, and they wouldn't pay that nominal allegiance to the other gods that were around. Not only that but they squabbled enormously and sometimes rioted about fine points of doctrine. If I had lived then I don't think I would have said "chuck 'em to the lions" but I would have been at best a peripheral luke-warm Christian and probably treated them like I did to those pairs of evangelists who used to knock on our doors.

Being specific about a thousand years ago there was the falling out between the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Catholic ones who gave their allegiance to the Pope in Rome. Ostensibly it was over one word in the Nicene Creed, but it really was a nasty power struggle. The Church failed that time.

Then there was the challenge that came with spread of knowledge, the rise of an educated middle class in cities, printing, the availability of the Bible in the local language, and the Reformation came about because it was obvious that it wasn't just priests who could interpret the scriptures. We still have a bit of an echo of that for we still regard the Communion service as not quite kosher unless an ordained person leads it.

The rate of challenges has sped up with women doing all the things in society and the Church that men do, and even the present Pope seems to be feeling the pressure of that wind of change.

Black people have become emancipated and at least in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of liberal people like us are equal to us.

The rainbow community are in process of being completely accepted, and that continues to be a bit of a challenge to religious groups who bolster their natural prejudice by putting some Bible texts before common sense and compassion, like the Gospels tell us the pharisees of old did when challenged by Jesus.

The atrocity wreaked on the Muslims in Christchurch has challenged us to be more open to those who follow Islam and those words that Jacinda said at the time "They are us" are a prophetic mantra to hold before our society.

I believe that opens up the challenge of today. If Peter had that dream today there certainly wouldn't be a command to kill and eat. If eating came into it, it would be "Move to a plant based diet Peter", but actually it wouldn't be physical food, but spiritual and attitude growing food. It would be food for the soul.

In that sheet there would be people of all manner of ethnicities, from different countries, holding different religious views, different political views, there would be beggars and the mega rich, criminals, people with all manner of different professions or none at all, married, single, straight, gay and in-between, old middle aged and young. The message that came with them would be they all have good in them, your job is to find it and encourage it, and not make them like you, but for you to find that good and learn and benefit from it.

We are in a world where we are rubbing shoulders with an enormous variety of people. The future of humanity depends on us getting the best out of each other. Those prophetic words of our Prime Minister sum it up "They are us"