

REFLECTION ‘The Cross and Evolution’

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While we were on holiday we went to a church service on Good Friday. It was a service called “The Veneration of the Cross”. It was a new experience for us. The meaning was made absolutely explicit in the lead up to the actual veneration. It was that the death of Jesus had paid the price of humanity’s original sin that had been inherited from the fall of Adam and Eve. So the crucifix represented the price that Jesus had paid on our behalf in order that we would be acceptable to God and then be able to enter heaven. There is nothing new about that belief, I expect that many of us were brought up to see the death of Jesus in that way and quite possibly some of you still do.

The actual veneration meant that a large crucifix was brought up to the front of the church and then most of the congregation came up and made their personal act of veneration. Many people knelt at the foot of the crucifix, and many kissed it. Some stood and maybe touched one of the hands of the representation of Jesus on the cross.

I know that congregation well and they are a caring bunch of people, treat each other as I believe people should, and do good things in the wider community. In no way would I want to let our personal differences in our Christian beliefs spoil our relationships. In what matters I feel that we are one with that congregation in accord with that prayer in John’s Gospel, though unlike our practice here we are not invited to share in Communion with them, but that doesn’t bother me much.

Anyway I think our personal differences in belief haven’t affected our relationship because they actually are not that interested in what I believe and have far more important things to concern them. That’s fine by me for debating or actually arguing to try to win only spoils a relationship and I think the relationship is far more important than winning an argument. Anyway logical arguments don’t usually change people’s minds and there is very little logical base to what I or any of us believe anyway.

I have heard it said “lay all the theologians in the world end to end and they still wouldn’t reach a conclusion”

I was very happy to have experienced that Veneration of the Cross, and as I sat there and listened and watched I started to think about what I believed the death of Jesus meant to me. My beliefs are very much a work in progress and I have continued to think about it on and off over the weeks since Easter. So what follows are some of the ramblings of an old minister who has quite rightly been put out to grass.

I share what is a common understanding with many liberal or maybe progressive Christians, and that is that Jesus on the cross is a dramatic representation of two different world views. There is the way of Jesus which is the way of love, compassion, forgiveness and open acceptance of people, and there is the way that some call the domination system that depends on power and privilege. In other words, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Caesar as it is sometimes put. Or good against evil as some would put it, but despite the wording of Psalm 97, I don’t like that way of describing it.

I came to feel there is more to it than that; I don't think that to conceive of life as being a struggle of good against evil; the ways of sacrificial love against the ways of selfishness, is quite realistic. Also many people lead lives that show some of the ways of Jesus and they don't suffer for it.

It didn't quite square with the reality of what people are like and their experiences. People cannot be divided into the good and the bad. Some are pretty saintly and a few are pretty horrible, but most of us are somewhere in between and where we are depends on all manner of circumstances at the time

I don't know if Jesus actually said anything like "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" when he was dying on the cross, but if he could have been so cool, calm and collected under those agonising circumstances, then it would have made sense for I would expect that those soldiers who were killing him and those bloodthirsty spectators were actually quite kind, reasonable people most of the time and they would have believed that what was happening was as things should be. The people who were practicing or watching that cruelty and nastiness were OK people not evil people and they probably didn't feel that guilty about what they were doing. Maybe they thought Jesus represented something that needed stamping out for the common good, or maybe it was just a job of work, or entertainment. I don't believe many of those people who were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus were monsters. But their way was the worldly way and it amounted to cruelty.

I thought of two ancient examples of the ways of love and the ways of cruelty or oppression.

The way of love was illustrated by the discovery of a human thigh bone many tens of thousands of years old that had been broken and had healed. That person had broken their leg and then must have been cared for by other humans, for there is no way he or she could have coped by themselves while the bone healed.

The way of cruelty was a carved tablet we saw three weeks ago in the Cairo museum that showed what an ancient Egyptian army had done to some unfortunate enemies. They had cut off their heads and placed the heads between their broken legs.

What I am coming to think is that those two ways are just part of being human.

I actually think that in a way it is like Ecclesiastes said, that there is time to love and a time to hate. I think that if a group of humans had not had the ability to be cruel and ruthless at times, then that group would have just ceased to exist.

Cruelty and love existing side by side was the way humans evolved. Our success as a species is a consequence of natural selection meaning that for humans to succeed they must have needed to be both like the people who cared for their comrade with the broken leg and also to be like that Egyptian army that was so cruel to the enemies they defeated.

The fact that Homo Sapiens succeeded so well by the time of Jesus means that was the way that worked; lovers and haters together were succeeders. Over the countless generations that existed before there must have been some groups that loved more and some more harsh selfish ones, but the mix that came to exist was the mix that worked.

However, there is a principle that goes with evolution, and that is that it is not the strongest or the cleverest organisms that succeed, but those that best adapt to changing circumstances.

And circumstances did change and they continue to change faster and faster.

By the time of Jesus there was very little doubt that the existence of humans as a species was a pretty safe bet. There were no other species challenging us for our position as top predators. Things were fairly civilized and the survival of someone's genes did not require one to wage war on the people who lived nearby. There was enough land to support everyone providing you didn't want excess. If humans had behaved in a Jesus way towards each other they would have coped very well with life; a whole lot better than they did when some tried to exploit the rest.

There must have been a time long before when the destructive, oppressive ways were needed for human survival, but by the time of Jesus the war waging, slave taking, privilege grabbing ways of that domination system were actually doing a lot of harm, not just to individual humans who were slaughtered, or enslaved or were second class citizens like woman or foreigners, but actually was harming everyone, the whole human race. Just like I have past my use-by date, the domination system had passed its use-by date long before the time of Jesus.

The way Jesus treated people, and what he believed, was the way that would benefit all humanity.

So what was the way of Jesus? Why is it the alternative that we Christians regard as the ideal? I think we only have look to those sayings that Jesus actually probably did say – the ones where Jesus says “The kingdom of heaven is like ...”

I will look at just one parable for a moment because I think it makes a point that is vital and yet missed. It is the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Of course it tells us to help others. It tells us that other people who are not like us can be very caring people and we are not to regard ourselves as better than others. But the vital point that I think is missed is that people who are different doesn't just mean people of different race or those who don't look like us, but the difference of those who think differently. Samaritans had a different form of Judaism than the Jews whom Jesus tended to live amongst.

The parable of the Good Samaritan tells us not to discriminate against people who have different politics or beliefs. For the Priest and Levite, we could put Sunni Muslims and for the Samaritan we could put Shi'ite Muslims, or vice versa, or Jews and Palestinians, or Catholics and Protestants, or ACT party members and Green party members, or those who view the meaning of the cross as a divine sacrifice to pay the penalty for our original sin, and my way that sees it in terms of evolution.

John has Jesus praying that all his followers may be one. That means that by the time John's Gospel was written they were not and we know from Church History that they were not.

However the prayer that all the followers of Jesus may be one begs the question “Who are the followers of Jesus?” I am not ruling any church group out of that regardless of the their doctrine preferences, but though John's Gospel probably only included overt Christians as

followers of Jesus, I am including a vast number of people who may not have even heard of Jesus but are nevertheless people who live by love. Over the centuries since Christianity was born it has become in effect the value system of much of the world. We and all those people are allies together. We have evolved into homo sapiens aroha.

I believe that Jesus, like the prophets before him realised that the way of the Kingdom of God was needed to stop people ruining the lives of others. He and they could see the damage that we modern people call the domination system was doing to others. From what I know of what life was like then, the horrible consequences would be staring him in the face. Life experience all around Jesus and the prophets and probably lots of ordinary but sensitive people was the convincing programme of education that reading mentioned.

Today with the enormous crises that face humanity, the way of Jesus that he died for and he describes in those sayings “The Kingdom of Heaven is like ...” is actually even more desperately needed than it was in his day.

The way of the systems of this world that crucified Jesus has long passed its use-by date. It is like the really old food that has gone thoroughly mouldy in its packet. The domination system has long been a dead-end in evolutionary terms. It is the way that divided people artificially into nation states, it is the way where Jewish leaders and Palestinian leaders shout the same old slogans and accusations at each other. It is the way that expects others to stop ruining our Earth and refuses to take action in our own lives. It is the way that does not recognise the value of those who are different from us.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that if we persist in that way then humanity has a very diminished future if a future at all.

I am suggesting that one way of looking at the cross of Jesus is that it illustrates the clash between the way of love and the way of the selfish domination system. Humanity had evolved with a mix of the two systems, but by the time of Jesus the way of love has become increasingly needed for the future of humanity and the domination system was a liability.

Now it has become desperate that humanity should evolve rapidly to forsake the ways of that domination system. I commend the lecture given by Naomi Klein on this that I have included a link to on the order of service.

If we fail to do that, the consequence is what has happened to countless species in the past. It is either to be reduced to an insignificant part of the story of life or straightforward extinction.

The way that Jesus lived and died for frees us from that failure and that bleak or hellish future, and frees us to be the people we need to be to continue and develop for future generations.

So in conclusion this old guy is suggesting that we in the Church, united with countless other groups of people have a mission to drive forward that vitally necessary evolution of humanity. This sermon wasn't written for Pentecost, but actually what I have been talking about is what I believe is the work of the Holy Spirit for us today; and surely that is pretty relevant.

If you want even more to read about this, then Geoff Mann sent me this link and it is also good in a non-religious way with lots of reference to the compassion of primates

http://evonomics.com/how-bad-biology-is-killing-the-economy/?utm_source=pocket&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=pockethits