

SERMON: Sunday – 6 August 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Order, order, order! God is not a God of disorder but of peace

Genesis 34:1-31

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Chapter 31 sees Jacob and his uncle Laban reconciled despite their difficulties in the past. Chapter 32 sees Jacob wrestle with God and receive the name Israel on the way to meeting his brother Esau. And we see the two brothers reconciled in chapter 3. Jacob then settles in Canaan for a while before heading to Bethel, the house of God, in chapter 35. It's between those two chapters that we have this traumatic account of Dinah and her brothers and the men of Canaan. It's as a result of Jacob's sons taking revenge on the men of the city that Jacob and the family could no longer settle in the land of Canaan.

Today's story is mired in violence. And we see the sons of Jacob responding to one violent act with more violence.

What is it about human nature that makes wronged people want to take revenge and get involved in the endless cycle of violence begetting more violence.

And why is it not so obvious to us that when we look at the life and death of Jesus we clearly see no trace of vengefulness anywhere near him? On the contrary, loving one's enemies, for Jesus, means total forgiveness through complete non violence; refusing to be drawn in to the game of tit for tat, an eye for an eye.

God in Jesus Christ is the archetype of non violence, the epitome of unconditional love and total forgiveness for all.

We are learning from Jesus how to respond to people and situations with compassion rather than react with violence. I want to respond compassionately rather than react violently.

Thomas Keating (1923–2018) is one of my favourite thinkers on this sort of theme. He spoke often about love and peacemaking as being inextricable from one another and from God.

In other words God's nature is love and God is Peace Maker.

And people, he says, are like
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“localised vibrations of the infinite goodness of God’s presence. Love is our very nature. Love is our first, middle, and last name. Love is all; not sentimentality, but love that is self-forgetful and free of self-interest”.

Thomas Keating writes that what this means is that people are made by God to show love tirelessly, no matter what happens. That’s the meaning of turning the other cheek ... it means you’re always willing to suffer first for the cause—that is to say, for communion with your enemies.

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“If you overcome your enemies, you’ve failed. If you make your enemies your partners, God has succeeded”.

[Thomas Keating, “Who Is God?,” Healing Our Violence through the Journey of Centering Prayer, 2002)]

I suppose when you think about it, the cross is the supreme example of the forgiving love and non violence of God.

In the crucifixion of Jesus, Jesus became the crucified so we would stop crucifying. He refused to transmit his pain onto others in revenge or violence. He suffered the pain of the world’s sinful violence in order to win back a people intent on crucifying one another.

Years later, the apostle Paul writes to the early church in Corinth, a fledgling church in need of a bit of order:

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God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:11

Or reconciled to him and his ways. That his nature would become ours.

This is why this is good news. When we hear the stories from our history and the stories of the sinful and barbaric practises such as that which we read today we can see that God should rightfully wipe us from the face of the earth. Yet he chooses not to. God chooses another way. A way that would mean we can be made right with God, reconciled, brought back together, put right, the righteousness of God.

God in Christ became the sin of revenge and violence so that we might be different.

The sons of Jacob needed to see that.
Our world today needs to see that.

There is no other hope than that found in the transfiguring love of God in Christ. That is the centre of our faith. It's the reason we believe in what we do. It's that hope of transformation in the world that keeps us living in the world and looking for the world to come.

A new commandment I give unto you that you love one another as I have loved you. By this all people will know

The Irish theologian, James Finlay recently wrote about something he calls mystical non-violence which he describes like this:

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“God depends on us to protect ourselves and each other, to be nurturing, loving, protective people. When suffering is there, God depends on us to reach out and touch the suffering with love that it might dissolve in love”.

He goes on to explain that further by saying:

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“But here's the thing: To be present to suffering and to touch the suffering with love, that it might dissolve in love, means to be grounded in the peace that is not dependent on the outcome of the effort because, regardless of how it turns out, God is unexplainably taking us to God, breath by breath, moment by moment. That's mystical nonviolence”.

James Finley, *The Mystical Foundations of Nonviolence* (2022)

Let me circle back to the early church in Corinth, that fledgling church in need of a bit of order.

And I think there is a link to what we've just been thinking about in that proper order comes about when non violent love is in place. Which is the same thing as saying when the kingdom of God is sought above all else. Because what we hope for is the establishment of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Paul's advice to the early church is that when people gather together in the name of Christ, as followers of the Way, then

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“each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation so that the church may be built up”

1 Corinthians 14:26-27

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“Two or three prophets should speak you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged ... be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues”

1 Corinthians 14:29, 31

“But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way (40).

You can look at these pieces of advice and think wow, that is so far removed from our current practise. But maybe that's ok.

God's word is adaptable and Paul is offering specific advice to a church in need of developing a sense of order yet led by the Spirit of God.

We're not to slavishly follow all of this advice and generalise it. For example, we generally don't take his advice on women not speaking but remaining silent and only asking their husbands when they get home.

If we were to follow that advice then we risk missing out on what God might be saying to the church in prophesy. Because the Scriptures are clear that women were often the prophetic voices and actors of the time. So to the churches who slavishly follow this advice I say, wake up.

But the principle is that everything should be done to allow the Spirit to work and the kingdom to come among us. So we must be sensitively awakened, to what the Spirit of God is saying in our midst and even outside of us.