

Sermon for Pentecost 8 2011, St Thomas Hanover

The great German Protestant theologian Karl Barth famously said that the preacher should hold the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Well the newspapers this weekend are dominated by two stories. The first concerned the losses on Wall Street on Friday, and the downgrading of the US's credit rating by the agency Standard and Poor, the related falls on the European markets and troubles in the Eurozone. The second the tragic loss of 38 American lives on board a Chinook helicopter in Afghanistan. The two events were not connected by the newspapers. But to a preacher they both point towards a moment of crisis.

The word crisis means many things but for the dialectical theologians who lived through the civilizational crises of the first half of the twentieth century in Europe it meant an existential moment calling for a confessional decision. And that decision is best described in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words 'who is Jesus Christ for us today?'

The crisis that threatened the budget of the nation last week - and that increasingly also threatens parts of Europe - is a crisis about whether rich and poor sink and swim together in this country, and indeed in Europe. Do the rich recognize that they have sufficient in common with everyone else to ensure that no one dies prematurely from treatable illness, that no one is reduced to penury by losing their job or their home, or through raising their kids. To put this another way the economic crisis is also a crisis about the family of families that make up this nation, and my own.

Our first reading today reveals a crisis about just such a family of families since the tribes of Israel were named after these siblings, who were the sons of the divided family of Israel, Leah and Rachel.

The sibling rivalry between the sisters who both became Jacob's wives is passed on to their children. The brothers have fallen out because Israel has allowed his love for his youngest - Rachel's child - to become too well known. Rivalry from one generation spills over to the next and to resolve the conflict the children of Leah scapegoat the youngest child of Rachel and 'conspire' to kill him. Reuben managed to dissuade his brothers against killing Joseph and instead he is sold into slavery. But the one who is favored by Israel turns out also to carry divine favor as well. The saga of Joseph unfolds in a way that reveals that Joseph is in the right again and again - against the wife of Potiphar, against Pharaoh's wise men, and then against his brothers when he is able to use his power to do something they could not - to save their father and his household from famine.

As you know the family saga continues when the brothers go to Egypt to find food. Benjamin the youngest is found guilty of having stolen a cup Joseph had had placed in his bag of wheat. The brothers are invited to leave him behind as punishment and 9 are willing - just as they had abandoned Joseph. But Judah resists and offers himself instead and Joseph finally breaks down in tears, reveals himself and forgives his brothers. And this act of forgiveness brings the family of families back together and saves them from the famine.

The fathers of the church saw in Joseph an analogy for Christ because, like Christ, he saved the people of God through the forgiveness of sins.

And this brings us to the second of our three readings which is a brief restatement of the first eight chapters of Romans in which Paul explains a number of things. One, sin and enmity are passed down in history and have marred human relationships from the beginning. Two the law does not redeem sin but merely heightens our awareness of it. Three Christ came to redeem sin by preaching peace, suffering the violent death of a victim and rising to new life.

For Saint Paul, and for the writer to the Hebrews, the death and resurrection of Christ brought to an end the sacrificial system of the Jewish religion: after Christ no more sins would be redeemed through killing, and no more would Jews or Gentiles - or other rival groups - resort to violently scapegoating each other. Christ was the last, the final scapegoat and by overcoming rivalry and violent scapegoating through forgiveness and love Christ open up a new potential outcome for human history.

Sadly however things did not quite work out as Christ and Saint Paul perhaps imagined they would. Scapegoating and sacrificial violence did not end in the Christian era. Christians refused to engage in war for the first three centuries after Christ and were often martyred for disloyalty to Caesar. But in the fourth century as Rome itself adopted the Christian religion the Church began to revisit its proscription against violence and to imagine that it might be possible for Christian rulers to go to war - and that such wars might be just - provided they were not vengeful and the intent was to protect the innocent and achieve peace.

In the modern age war was in danger of becoming the new norm for Christian Europe, at least from the terrible total wars begun by Napoleon in the nineteenth century until 1945. The national churches of Europe failed dismally to resist the slide into total war, although the peace churches continued so to do. But after so

much destruction and violence even the Vatican came around to the possibility that war in the modern era had become so total and so indiscriminate in its effects that it could no longer be just (and this has been the Papal position since Pope John XXIII).

But for American political theorists such as Robert Kagan in his book *Of Paradise and Power* Europe's growing reluctance to engage in war is a sign of weakness, while America, through its special forces as well as its regular troops continues to increase the global spread of its military commitments, and its military expenditure into the twenty-first century.

And yet here is a paradox. Europeans go to church in far fewer numbers than North Americans. Externally it would seem that the United States is by far the more confessedly Christian country these days than my own. When I cycle along the back roads here I am reminded of this when I make my way back into town and pass a number of signs on the way in - including St Thomas - pointing the visitor to the churches, and church service times I may expect to find in this town.

If Christ died to bring an end to rivalry, scapegoating and violence, and this country has the most numerous and regular churchgoers of any country in the developed world, it would seem that either I have mis-stated the meaning of his death or that Christ failed in the attempt.

This is why it seems to me that the crucial question facing Christians in America today (as also in Europe) is who is Jesus Christ for us today. The economic cost of war as the default mode of the United States' response to perceived external threats (and my country has followed close behind) to its interests has grown gargantuan. The Congressional Budgetary Office figures clearly show that the present deficit

began in 2002 which was precisely the time when the United States launched not one but two external wars, both of them against countries whose governments and people had committed no hostile acts against the United States. Ten years later the nation is doing the sums and finding it cannot afford to carry on with war without making sacrifices. But who is to make the sacrifices? The rich who according to the New York Times last week were spending on luxury goods like never before in New York City? Well no: it looks like being people on medicare; the recipients of social security checks; various other recipients of 'entitlements' which we are told the nation can no longer afford. This it seems to me is scapegoating the poor for decisions they did not take and for which they were not responsible.

Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

Well to find out I turn finally to our gospel which at first sight is an odd accompaniment to our other two readings. The story is well known. Jesus - the Son of God - walks out on the water of the Sea of Galilee to meet his disciples in a boat and as he approaches the boat Simon Peter sees him and ventures out of the boat onto the water to join him. At first he seems to succeed but then he begins to sink. Jesus then reaches out his hand and rescues him saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'

Let us read this story with a little imagination and attention to symbolism as the church fathers were accustomed to do.

The sea in ancient myth is a symbol of chaos and conflict. In this story it the waters symbolize the coming conflict and violence which will see Jesus crucified on the cross. Peter will be caught up in those events and he will be sorely tested by them, tested to the point of betraying his faith in Jesus. And yet in his resurrection ap-

pearances Jesus does not chide or condemn Peter. No, he forgives him, calls him the rock on which the church will be built and gives him and the other disciples, the 'keys of the kingdom' and in particular the power to forgive sins.

Then let us return to the literal meaning of the story. Peter is near engulfed by the waves. His faith wavers and he starts to sink. What does Christ do? He immediately reaches out an arm to save him from drowning. Only then does he chide him and try to teach him where he went wrong. Forgiveness and rescue come *first*, and second the apostle to be is invited to see what he got wrong and to put things right.

Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

The one who lived and died to reveal that love and not hate is the meaning of history?

The one who did not resist evil doers but in submitting to their blows and torments for ever turned away the evolved and repetitive human tendency to turn on the sick, the poor, and the immigrant and announce that they are the problem, they are the reason society is troubled, and if only they can be excluded, scapegoated and suppressed *then* society will be shored up, rivalries will no longer threaten to break up the tribe, the family, the family of families?

Is this the Christ we confess? Well the answer to this question depends on how we read the story of salvation. Many conservative Christians believe that it was God - and the Jews - that killed Jesus on the cross because killing his Son was the only way God could intervene in human history and turn things around. I do not believe this. Neither God nor the Jews killed Jesus but an imperial power, and apart from the Incarnation and the Resurrection, Christ's death is not redemptive. And Paul

says as much in 1 Corinthians. If there is no resurrection, he says, then we of all people are most to be pitied.

But there are many conservative Christians, in the United States today, and in other parts of the world who read the death of Christ this way. If God redeems human evil through violent punishment and sacrifice of his Son then this seems to confirm what Joseph's brothers, like so many others in myth and history, have believed: that the family could only be united again when they had violently killed a scapegoat, the youngest brother. And if God does it this way, then we should follow.

But Joseph forgives - he does not repeat the cycle of scapegoating - and so Israel is saved. Christ does the same and more because the outcome of Christ's life, death and resurrection is not just to redeem Israel but to break down the barrier between Jew and Greek - to make possible salvation and love between peoples that were rivals.

Who is Jesus Christ for us today? He is the one who says render to no man evil for evil. Love your enemies, pray for them that curse you, if someone strikes you on the one cheek shame him and offer your other also. These teachings have changed history including in the twentieth century; when Gandhi learned them from Leo Tolstoy's fascinating *Gospel in Brief* and taught Hindus the art of nonviolent resistance towards the British Raj; when Martin Luther King discovered the same deep truths in the gospel and used the same tactics in the civil rights struggle here in the United States. These teachings might change history again but only if more Christians openly acknowledge that Christ redeemed sin not through violence but through the depths of love and mercy that he showed in refusing to fight violence with violence.

When we confess Jesus Christ as Lord in the midst of the choppy seas that our respective nations are passing through right now we should then remember to confess that Christ is not only King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but also the Prince of Peace.

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(If you liked this sermon there are more like it in Michael's recent book

Cuttlefish, Clones and Clusterbombs: Preaching, Politics and Ecology at

<http://www.amazon.com/Cuttle-Fish-Clones-Cluster-Bombs/dp/023252788>)