
COMPLETING THE TAKEOVER!

SERMON FOR ST PAUL'S, BORONIA, 19TH JULY 2009

Interesting readings, eh? The first reading was from the book of Joshua in the Old Testament. If you've been paying attention for the last few weeks you might have worked out that we are preaching our way through the book of Joshua. And the story about how the children of Israel conquered the land.

The children of Israel had arrived at the edge of the Jordan river after wandering forty years in the desert. Joshua led them across the Jordan and set about waging war on everyone present. And they were very good at it.

They started by knocking off the town of Jericho. Joshua fought the battle of Jericho and the walls came a-tumbling down. I feel a song coming on.

But this was only the start of their campaign. Joshua had only just begun to wage war. This was only chapter 6. Over the next few chapters, Joshua works his way through the countryside, demolishing towns, killing the inhabitants and carrying off anything valuable, including not a few people as slaves.

Chapter 10 of the book of Joshua has a forensic list that accounts the death, destruction and general mayhem, city by city. Starting in verse 28 with the town of Makkedah, Joshua, and I quote, "put the city and its king to the sword and totally destroyed everyone in it. He left no survivors. And he did to the king of Makkedah as he had done to the king of Jericho."

And, rest assured, what he had done to the king of Jericho wasn't pretty.

From Makkedah he goes and attacks Libnah. And the pattern repeats. Verse 30 says "the city, and everyone in it, Joshua put to the sword. He left no survivors there. And he did to its king as he had done to the king of Jericho."

And from Libnah to Lachish. Same story.

And so on, until all 31 cities are destroyed. Until all 31 kings are done to as he had done to the king of Jericho. Until there were no survivors in any town.

By the time we get to chapter 12, Joshua has completed the takeover. He has knocked them all off. Thirty-one kings are dead. And 31 kingdoms have been absorbed under the control of Joshua and the children of Israel.

And with the job done, the whole community go back to where they started. They return to the town of Gilgal by the river Jordan. And it says at the end of chapter 11, "then the land had rest from war."

Well, phew!

There are two ways to think about what this is all supposed to mean to us today. Well, probably there are more than two ways, but I can only think of two.

The first way to think about this is that this is a story about the triumph of good over evil. Joshua good. All these other kings, and their people, evil. And, of course, good is supposed to triumph over evil. And, of course, God, who it goes without saying is good ... God has commanded Joshua to do this. It says so in Deuteronomy 20:16-18.

In the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them - the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites - as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God.

So, there's a reason for killing all these people. They worship the wrong gods. They will lead the children of Israel into sin, which is undoubtedly true because they were particularly easy to lead into sin. So, to protect the purity of their religion, the infidels had to be all killed.

Well, like I say, that's one way to interpret this story. It's the way of interpreting it that led to the crusades. Today this way of explaining the story leads people to wage war on other people, just because they're the wrong religion.

This way of interpreting the story of Joshua's conquests relies on a belief in redemptive violence. If you believe in redemptive violence you will say that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. The belief in redemptive violence and the stories about redemptive violence are one of the oldest continuously repeated stories on Earth.¹

Walter Wink, the American theologian says that "the belief that violence *saves* is so successful because it doesn't appear to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It's what works. It seems inevitable."

If we think that we live in a world that is based on a Christian belief system, I think we are fooling ourselves. The most common and widespread belief system in the world today is not Christianity. It is not Islam. It is not any of the belief systems that we traditionally label as religions at all.

The most common belief in the world today is belief in the myth of redemptive violence. Our news, our entertainment, our national symbols ... they are all preaching the myth of redemptive violence.

What does this story look like?

Well, the pattern is so common on our television screens today, you will recognise it immediately.

First, "an indestructible hero is doggedly opposed to an unreformable and equally indestructible villain."

Second, "nothing can kill the hero, although for the first three-quarters of the TV show he (rarely she) suffers grievously and appears hopelessly doomed, until, miraculously, the hero breaks free, vanquishes the villain, and restores order. Until the next episode."

And third, "nothing finally destroys the villain or prevents his or reappearance, whether the villain is soundly trounced, jailed, drowned or shot into outer space." He lives to fight another day.

This is the basic plot line for most cartoons that we serve up to our children hour after hour. Whether it's Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, or X-men, or Transformers, or Batman, or the Roadrunner cartoons.

And not only cartoons. Take a look at the TV program guide. Count the number of cop shows, crime shows, adventure shows in which good and evil conflict so that good can triumph. At least temporarily.

We are drenched in this myth of redemptive violence.

When I was growing up, we didn't have SpongeBob SquarePants or Bob the Builder. We had Popeye the Sailor Man. His nemesis was a big guy with a stubby beard named Bluto.

¹ This follows the rationale by Walter Wink in *The Powers That Be*, page 42 and following.

Walter Wink describes a typical episode of the Popeye cartoon in which Bluto abducts Popeye's girlfriend, Olive Oyl. She is screaming and kicking and "when Popeye attempts to rescue her, the massive Bluto beats little Popeye to a pulp. Meanwhile Olive Oyl is wringing her hands and whimpering. At the last moment, as our hero oozes to the floor, and Bluto is trying to have his way with Olive Oyl, a can of spinach pops from Popeye's pocket and spills into his mouth. Transformed by this gracious infusion of power, Popeye then easily demolishes the villain and rescues his beloved."

This is Redemptive Violence. The format never varies.

Walter Wink points out that "neither party ever gains any insight or learns from these encounters. They never sit down and discuss their differences. Repeated defeats do not teach Bluto to honour Olive Oyl's humanity. And repeated pummellings do not teach Popeye to swallow his spinach *before* the fight."

The point of all this is to suggest that this idea that violence can make things right is hard-wired into our nature. Our natural response is to fight. It's a lot easier to give way to the Rambo within us, than to find the Nelson Mandela within.

And, if we are not careful, we'll read this story of Joshua as approving of violence, as validating the Rambo within, as saying in the battle between good and evil, there is a such a thing as good violence.

I'm sure I'm not the only person here who feels just a bit uncomfortable about all these people that were killed by Joshua and the children of Israel. Killed, just because they *might* lead the children of Israel astray.

Every person who *breathed* in these cities was killed. Every one of them guilty?

It's tempting, of course, to suggest that what we have here is not true history, but just a story. We know that the Bible writers weren't primarily writing history. They were trying to say something about God.

But, I am pretty certain that, even if some scholars think some of the details here might be a bit fabulous and invented, there is little doubt that when the children of Israel occupied the land, there was fighting. People died. For sure.

I want to try to explain how I deal with my discomfort about this Joshua story. If you have the same discomfort, maybe the way I have been thinking it through might be helpful.

But first, a story about violence. And a parrot.

There was this bloke with a parrot. And this parrot would swear like a sailor. This parrot was seriously foul-mouthed. This parrot could swear for five minutes straight without repeating itself.

The trouble was that the guy who owned this parrot was a really nice, quiet conservative man and the bird's constant swearing was embarrassing and very frustrating. It was driving him to distraction and making him angry.

One day it got to be just too much and in an uncharacteristic fit of rage the man grabbed the parrot violently by the throat, shook it really hard, and yelled, "CUT IT OUT!".

It had no effect. The parrot just swore more than ever.

So the chap got even madder and took the bird and locked it in the kitchen cupboard. This really aggravated the parrot and it started clawing, and scratching and when the guy finally let the bird out it let out a stream of vulgarities that would make a sailor blush.

At that point, the guy was so mad he opened the door of the freezer and shoved the bird inside. For the first few seconds there was a terrible din from inside the freezer. The bird kicked and clawed and thrashed. Then it suddenly went VERY quiet.

After a few moments, the guy thought maybe the bird had hurt itself. There was no sound from the freezer. And after a couple of minutes of silence, he started to really worry. So he opened the freezer door.

The parrot calmly walked out and sat on the outstretched arm of the owner. And it said, "Awfully sorry about the trouble I gave you. I'll do my best to improve my vocabulary from now on."

Well the man was astounded. He couldn't understand the transformation that had come over the parrot.

Then the parrot said, "By the way, what did the chicken do?"

...

And, in case you didn't notice, that story also relies on us believing something about redemptive violence.

OK. How are we going to cope with Joshua and his mass slaughtering?

Well, my way of reading Scripture is to read it backwards. I don't mean, literally. I don't start with the last word in Revelation and read backwards word by word.

Do you know what the last word in Revelation is, by the way? A-men.

Well, by reading the Bible backwards, I just mean that I know how it ends.

It ends with Jesus. In order to understand what leads up to Jesus, I need to begin with an understanding of Him. The Old Testament points the way to Jesus.

So, let's look at Jesus for a moment.

Here is a man who combats injustice and oppression with love. He loves his enemies. He will sacrifice himself for them. We celebrate not someone who died killing his enemies, but one who died forgiving them. Jesus modelled self-sacrifice right to end. There was, in him, no retaliation. Not even self-defence.

Jesus is the Prince of Peace. He rules, not with a sword, but with a towel. Which is why, in the foyer of our home, Judy and I have hung a batik print of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. This is the one we follow.

One thing is certainly true for us today from the Joshua story. We are engaged in a battle. There is good and evil in the world. There is good and evil within us, inside you and me. Joshua and Jesus agree about that.

But Jesus brought a new way of dealing with the battle. He provided new tools for the battle.

You know, one of the amazing things about the Old Testament is how it takes the common myths and beliefs of the world and subverts them. The Bible is constantly doing this.

Take, for example, the story we heard just a few weeks back about how everyone in Jericho was killed except one person. Rahab. The prostitute who helped Joshua's spies to escape.

Now, in the common myth of redemptive violence, the evil persons would be killed. Good warriors kill bad warriors. That's the formula. In the cowboys and Indian movies of my youth, which, of course were not written by American Indians, the cowboys were good and the Indians bad. There was blood shed on both sides of the fight, but, in the end, the good guys won. And the good guys were never Indians.

So, we would expect that anyone who was portrayed in some way as bad, would be a gonner. But Rahab survives.

Now she survives, because she does a good thing, you will say. She hid the spies and let them escape. Yes, that's right.

But what is she? Let's not mince words here, now that the children have gone to Wise Guys. She's a hooker. By the standards of the day, and even today, she's engaged in a sinful occupation.

Yet, she is saved, redeemed even, by love. She does a loving thing, she rescues the spies. And that loving act overcomes her sinfulness. And **she** is saved.

I think this is wonderful. Right in the midst of all this good versus evil bloodshed, the Bible has this little story in which love conquers evil. Not might conquers evil, although there's plenty of that trying to go on around Rahab. But love conquers evil. I reckon this is a pointer for us. As we read these stories in the front part of the Bible, it is stories like this that point their way forward to Jesus.

And not only to Jesus.

You see, there is a story in the New Testament that's a bit like the story of Rahab the prostitute. It's the story of a terrorist. A wicked murdering terrorist.

And yet a terrorist who was transformed because he encountered God.

The terrorist of whom I speak is better known to us as St Paul. Do not doubt that prior to his conversion he was a terrorist.

The Bible informs us that he had some role in the stoning of Stephen and then he set about to destroy the church. He went from house to house. He dragged off men and women and put them in prison. He was "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples."

And then he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. And what does Jesus do? Does he trip Paul up? Does he knock him down and beat him to a pulp? Does he knock him from here to Kingdom come?

No. Jesus just asks Paul "Why do you persecute me?" We don't know what tone is in that voice Paul hears. But I can't imagine it was a violent tone. I'm pretty sure the voice of God speaks more in sorrow than anger.

Anyway, just like with Rahab the Prostitute, Paul's life is saved. He is transformed, although it takes him a little while to see things clearly again.

And it is Paul, who helps us to see how to reconcile the imagery of violence with the imagery of the Kingdom of God. And that was in our second reading today.

When Paul is writing to the Christians in Ephesus he takes the imagery of battle, and subverts it with peace.

He says:

EPH 6:13 Put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Paul urges us to engage in battle. Yes, there is a fight going on. But our weapons are not the weapons of violence. They are truth, righteousness, preparation for peace, faith, salvation and the word of God.

And with this armour we may face the battle. By the way, if you have a look at the passage, you'll see that all the armour is on the front. There's no protection for the back. So we better face forward in this battle. Take it front on.

But not with the false weapons of redemptive violence. With the weapons of the Kingdom of God.

A final observation.

History as we read it and learn it is itself drenched in this myth of redemptive violence. We talk about the nation of Australia coming of age at Gallipoli or in the trenches of Tobruk. This is the myth of a secular religion that is growing in power every year in our country.

I don't wish to diminish the sacrifice of people in war. There are war heroes in my own family.

But there is another side of history that is less often told. It's the peace side of history.

In America, the common belief is that America is a free country because it won a war of independence from Great Britain. An American professor of history named James Juhnke has written a book called "The Missing Peace" that debunks the role of violence in securing freedom for Americans.

One story in the book was absolutely news to me. You see, America had a war with Britain, but it didn't have one with France. Why?

What constitutes the United States of America today is an amalgam of former British and former French colonies. The so-called French Quarter in New Orleans is called the French Quarter, because it WAS French. Old Orleans is a town in France, you know. Except it isn't called Old Orleans there. It's just Orleans.

Well, how is it that the Americans had to fight for their independence against the Brits, but not against the Frogs?

Well, John Adams was the second President of the United States in 1799 when the US almost went to war with France. George Washington had been dragged out of retirement to organise the Army in a war against France. Diplomats were sent over to France and were dismissed with full Gallic hauteur. In fact, the Americans were asked to pay to get an audience with the Foreign Minister. The Americans were greatly insulted and went off in a huff. I guess they couldn't get a taxi.

Adams' entire cabinet was unanimous in wanting war. If he had asked Congress for a declaration of war against France, it would have passed with an overwhelming majority. At the last minute, Adams decided to send another peace delegation to France. He had received word from some people returning from France that their Foreign Minister was willing to listen.

Maybe another delegation would do some good, Adams thought.

A Quaker named Logan was a member of the delegation. The peace delegation's work was immensely unpopular but they worked with the French to get an agreement and there was no war against France.

And four years later, without a war, the former French colony of Louisiana became part of the United States of America.

I'm quoting from James Juhnke, the history professor I mentioned before. He writes:

“President Adams’ decision for peace was a momentous peace event, but because it did not produce any dead people, any war heroes, we don’t know about it in America today. Before John Adams died, he said he didn’t want anything else on his gravestone but this: *Here lies John Adams, who took upon himself the responsibility of the peace with France in the year 1800.*”

It is to the Prince of Peace that I choose to pledge my allegiance.

To the Gospel of enemy love, because St Paul reminds me that there is no terrorist beyond redemption.

To the Kingdom of the poor and broken.

To a King who loves his enemies so much he died for them.

To the refugee of Nazareth.

To the homeless rabbi who had no place to lay his head.

To the cross rather than the sword.

To the banner of love, above any flag.

To the one who rules with a towel rather than an iron fist.

To the one who rides a donkey rather than a war-horse.

To revolutions that set both the oppressor and the oppressed free.

To the Way that leads to life.

To Jesus.

A-men