

## **Reject Worldly Ways!**

### **A sermon for St Paul's Anglican on 21<sup>st</sup> May 2006**

*We had a party last week. An 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party. For Richard. Some of you attended. Or some of your children perhaps.*

*Judy and I were led to observe that 18<sup>th</sup> birthday parties have changed a bit since we were 18.*

*Some things were the same of course. The music was deafeningly loud in the 1960s, just as it is today. And teenagers today wear the strangest clothes, just like we did in the 1960s. I still have a photo of my blousy shirt and the trousers with the huge bell bottoms. But other things are different today.*

*In the first place it was really a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 18 is the new 21.*

*In the second place, no-one plays games at these parties any more. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing, because I think our party games were often rather cringe-inducing. Certainly the memory of some of them is.*

*But in the third place, we hired a security guard. Never in my life before have we held a party where it was felt necessary to hire a security guard. Now since this party was attended mostly by your children, we did not really need a security guard. No-one misbehaved. Well, not that I am going to mention to any parents present anyway. And, of course, no-one gate-crashed. The security guard just stood around all night and policed the line beyond which an alcoholic beverage could not be consumed. And since more than half the people attending were drinking soft drinks, this was no arduous duty.*

*Yet, if you know anything about teenage parties these days, you will know that EVERYONE seems to hire a security guard.*

*What is happening to our world, that you need security at a private party?*

*Why?*

*I think most people will agree that it is because the world is more dangerous now than it used to be. We all agree that there is more violence in the world than ten, or twenty years ago. More violence, means more protection. More gate-crashing stabbings, means more security guards.*

*Is that right? Is the world more violent than it used to be? Is violence increasing? It certainly seems so. And why is it so?*

*We used to have something, a mechanism, to take violence out of the world, but the mechanism isn't working like it used to.*

*That gives rise to two questions, What is that mechanism, and why isn't working?*

*Well, we know, that a social group, a community, can purge themselves of internal conflict or violence, by finding an external adversary, an enemy, if you like, or an internal trouble-maker. In other words, a community can unify itself by directing its violence against someone from within who is worthy of*

*being killed or expelled as the source of all its problems, or an external adversary, an outside enemy, who needs to be resisted or fought off.*

*Now, most of us would agree this is true. We know this from our own life experience. The fact that anthropologists have voluminous evidence for this mechanism at work down the centuries is simply verification of what we know from our own experience of the world.*

*The best way to unify a group is to identify a common enemy. And to scapegoat that enemy. Blame that enemy, So, marketing blames engineering. Everyone thinks the problem is in the finance department. And the finance department accuses the production department of not following the accounting rules.*

*Or, for those who can remember, Britain was never so unified as when it was fighting the Germans.*

*It turns out that this mechanism rejuvenates and unifies all kinds of communities. It works in families, in church committees, in tennis clubs. And it works in multi-national organisations. And it works in nations and whole planets. They can create unity and peace within their family, or committee, or nation, so long as they have someone against whom they can vent their hostility.*

*The way this mechanism works, the anthropologists show us, is that the hostility or violence within the individuals in the community is exported, or drained off, into the one they find to be despicable, or evil, or a threat.*

*At the heart of the communities of the world is a mechanism something like what we would call "scapegoating." Which, to go off on a temporary tangent leads to the question about why Jesus had to die on the cross. Why didn't he just die from leprosy? But I'll let that hang for us to think about and maybe deal with another day.*

*Anyway, my point for today is that the world had a mechanism for dealing with violence and hostility. The mechanism we call scapegoating. And it is not working as well as it used to.*

*Now, the fact that we have a word for the mechanism, tells us something about it. If you can put a label on something, it shows you know something about it already.*

*For example, SNOW. In English we have one word for snow, and a few adjectives—powder snow, for example. But the Eskimos have 15 words for snow, although there is an urban myth that they have 400 words for snow. Even having 15 words for snow shows that the Eskimos know a lot more about snow than the English. Why? Because they have more of it, obviously.*

*Perhaps we should pause and ask why there is only one word for love in the English language, but seven Greek words. Do Greeks make better lovers?*

*But I digress.*

*The fact that we have a word for this violence-draining mechanism, tells us something about it. If you can put a label on something, it shows you know something about it already.*

*And if we know something about it, when we understand it well enough to name it, there's a good chance it is not going to work as well, as when we were ignorant about it.*

*For example...*

*When telephone sales began to intrude into our homes, most of us were nice to the people who called. Even if they interrupted our evening meal, we would politely listen to their sales spiel because it sounded so authentic.*

*"Hello Mr Hunt" Oh, she knows my name. She must be a nice person.*

*"We understand you are interested in making profitable investments." Why, yes, I was interested in being a good investor. How did she know that?*

*"We have some marsh land in Corio to sell to you if you'll just sign up right away." Wait a minute, this sounds a bit dodgy.*

*But, nowadays of course, we know what this is. We have a name for it. We call it telemarketing. Well, actually most of us have rather more colourful names for it. But the point is that when we recognise we are being manipulated by a clever sales technique, the technique loses its effect.*

*We say, This is a sales pitch. And as soon as we name it, it stops working. No thanks. Goodbye.*

*Of course, most of us have got to know this particular mechanism, telemarketing, so well now that as soon as we hear an Indian accent on the line we hang up. Which, I wish to point out, can be a bit embarrassing if it is Ivan Roshiah ringing up to find out what time the music practice is on.*

*So the fact that we have a name for scapegoating, already tells us that it does not work as well as before we had a name for it. It only works well, if you don't know what you are doing.*

*And now I am going to tell you something about the Bible that I suspect most of you don't know. And that is, that unique among world religions, the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, reveal the scapegoating mechanism. Indeed, the reason that this mechanism works less and less well is that God has revealed it to us. God has shown us what's going on. He has given us eyes that see, and ears that ear.*

*This mechanism is first revealed to the world in the Old Testament. That is, it is first given a name, the name "scapegoating" in Leviticus 16:8. The mechanism has been IN the world from the beginning. But it is the Christian and Jewish revelation that reveals it.*

*But, unique to our Bible among religious writings, the mechanism is named and revealed long before the people of the old testament could understand it. It is revealed to a pre-Christian world that could not understand it in the same way that the idea of "loving your neighbour" was revealed. As Tom reminded us last week, God reveals these truths about the world and His Kingdom long before Jesus, long before the event that COULD help us to understand.*

*So scapegoating was revealed to the world a long while ago. But have we stopped scapegoating? NO. It's worse than ever. But it's not working. The power of scapegoating to drain away hostility in society is weaker and weaker with every passing day.*

*If you go back a few hundred years and scanned the books, and papers and writings of the time, you will find the word violence occurs much less often than today. Today it is everywhere.*

*Why is that? Is there more violence today than before? Are teenage parties more dangerous than 40 years ago? Actually I don't think so. It is because we SEE more violence today than we did a few hundred years ago.*

*Late last year I read the report of the United Nations Human Security Centre. It shows, very much to my surprise, that armed conflict in the world has been in steady decline for 50 years, that the world is a much safer, less violent place than it has ever been. Surprised? I was.*

*You know, I am reading through the Old Testament at the moment, a few chapters a day. Last week I actually came across the story of Jephthah. A story I had never heard of before. What a surprising discovery. Some verses in the Bible on which no human appears to have ever preached. At least not in my hearing.*

*Straight after Jephthah in the book of Judges is the story of Samson. And I had forgotten more about the Samson story than I remembered. Man, what a violent dude! He make Rambo look like a pussy cat. He kills a lion while a teenager—actually he literally tears it into pieces. His first wife deceives him, so he goes off and kills 30 men at Ashkelon just to take their clothes. An early version of “The Naked and the Dead” apparently.*

*When he decides to burn down the Philistine’s corn fields he catches 300 foxes and sets their tails alight and lets them run through the fields. Which causes the local community to go and burn to death his first wife and her whole family. Now I wonder why they did that?*

*In response to this “he fell on them for all he was worth and caused great havoc.”*

*Anyway this goes on and on for a couple of chapters. But the word “violence” appears nowhere. The narrative does not appear to condemn the violence. Indeed, the tone is one of moral justification. Samson is the good guy. He is administering justice to the Philistines, and presumably to the foxes too.*

*Why did Samson not see his actions as violent? What stopped him from seeing it?*

*The violence we don’t see is the violence that is just, that is necessary, that is appropriate to the situation. If you go back in time to an Aztec priest up on the high altar as he cuts out the heart of his human sacrifice and holds the heart up to the Sun God and you say to him “Gee, this seems like a violent act”, he wouldn’t know what you are talking about.*

*The word “violence” as we use it today, would not apply to that at that time. Nor would it have applied in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain to hanging somebody who was guilty of some dreadful crime.*

*Even today, there are plenty of people who embrace what I might see as violent scapegoating, and they do so without any of the moral awareness I might bring to the event.*

*About nine years ago I drove up from North Ossetia towards Chechnya. We went to a town to visit a group of doctors who were trying to set up a clinic because the Russian medical system had completely broken down. When we arrived we were greeted with a distraught medical team. Their chief surgeon had been murdered that morning. Why? Because he was the victim of a revenge killing. A patient had died during surgery, and the family of the patient killed the surgeon in revenge. In that society, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, justice still demanded an eye for an eye, a life for a life. The surgeon was the perfect scapegoat for their anger and grief. Did they think they were unjustly violent? Well, I don’t know because I never talked to the murderer. But I’d be willing to bet that the murderer felt no guilt at the time. One hopes that maybe later, in a society touched however lightly by the message of Christ, there might come a moral hangover.*

*But back in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, do you think the people who crucified Jesus knew that what they were doing was scapegoating violence? No. Jesus asks God to forgive them specifically because they do not know what they are doing.*

*And Caiaphas is on record as providing the perfect formulation for the scapegoating mechanism. "It is better for you that one man die for the people ... to bring them together and make them one." John 11:50-52*

*Caiaphas knew the world's rules so well, he had no idea what he was doing.*

*Jesus spoke in parables to the people because, in his words, "they had eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear."*

*The world's ways are so hard-wired into us that we often do not see what we are doing. I doubt a day goes by in my life, that Jesus does not look down at me from Heaven and says "Father forgive him because he does not know what he is doing." My daily prayer is that God will give me eyes that can see, and ears that can hear.*

*So where does this leave us?*

*I guess after all that stuff I need to remind us that we are working our way through some aspects of John's 1<sup>st</sup> letter. Today's message is the 4<sup>th</sup> in a series that began with Brian inviting us to "Walk in the Light." Then Gavin asked us to "Obey Christ Fully" and last week, Tom said we needed to "Love the family." This week's theme is "Reject Worldly Ways" which is why I have been talking so much about how the world works. How can we reject the ways of the world if we do not know how the world works? How can we avoid falling into the world's behavioural traps if we have eyes that cannot see the traps and ears that cannot hear?*

*In today's reading John says:*

*You must not love this passing world*

*Or anything that is in the world*

*The love of the Father cannot be in any one who loves the world, because nothing the world has to offer—*

*The sensual body*

*The lustful eye*

*Pride in possessions—*

*Could ever come from the Father*

*But only from the world;*

*And the world, and all it craves for,*

*Is coming to an end;*

*But anyone who does the will of God Remains for ever.*

*John could not be clearer in his call to us to reject worldly ways. But there's a problem. You see, if we are ignorant about the way the world works, how can we know what to reject? If we have eyes that cannot see, and ears that cannot hear, we'll think John is only writing about sex and materialism. After all he specifically mentions lust and possessions.*

*But clearly there is more to it than that. John says we are not to love ANYTHING that is in the world.*

*And he points out that the world is coming to an end. Does he mean that sex and possessions are coming to an end? I don't think so. Because John is also telling us what it is that will last forever. The will of God is what will last forever. Which is why Gavin spoke so eloquently about being obedient. But let's not trivialise God's will as merely being responsible when it comes to sex or possessions. These might be important, but they are substantially less than all of the Good News.*

*Rejecting the world's ways requires us to understand how the world works, and then to apply our knowledge of the way God works. Replacing scapegoating with forgiveness. Replacing hostility with love of the enemy. Replacing desire for possessions with desire for worship. Replacing lies with truth. Replacing the desire for power with the desire for personal sacrifice.*

*OK, if you've been following so far, you might be asking how one develops eyes that can see and ears that can hear.*

*In order to fully reject the ways of this passing world, we need to develop a new sensibility. We need to be able to see our culture as we have never seen it before. We need to get outside of our world and see it from a new perspective. How does one do that? Here are a few ways I have found helpful.*

*First, take any opportunity to live outside the culture of your birth. The opportunity to live cross-culturally is one of the best ways to help us realise just how much our sense of right or wrong isn't right. Or wrong. But I don't mean travel. When we travel we take our culture with us, along with our suitcases.*

*I mean LIVE cross-culturally. Go live in another country. Speak to anyone here who has come to live in Australia from another country. Most of them will tell you how learning to live in the Australian culture, helped them to critique and examine the culture they left behind.*

*Go live in another country. For two years. And before you are 40. It's probably too late after that. By then, for most people, our cultures are already hard-wired beyond change.*

*Second, if you can't get out of one culture for 2 years, try getting out of it one day a week. Attend church regularly. But when we come into church, make a conscious effort to leave the world behind. Don't bring the world in here. It does not belong.*

*Worship is an other-worldly experience. Or it ought to be. Let us not worship like the world expects we should. This is not a television program or a football match. The rules of worship are made in Heaven, not on earth.*

*I like things to be well organised. I like things to run properly and in good order (I married a Presbyterian, after all). But as much as I like high production values, worship is not about high production values.*

*I remember organising an introductory worship service for an international conference in the Philippines. It took weeks of organising and a whole day of rehearsals. It went off without a hitch. A major production success.*

*Afterwards, I was talking to a lovely Swiss priest who specialised in meditation and reflection. I asked him how he thought it went. He knew I was pleased with what we had done. He said, "Very tight, I'd say. No room for the Holy Spirit at all."*

*So take advantage of worship. Every week it is an opportunity to leave the world at the door. If we can.*

*Third, let us try to be holy. I think genuine attempts at personal piety aren't a bad discipline. Let us try to live more like Jesus. It's not easy. We won't succeed. But we should try. The more we try to live like Jesus, the more the Good News gets out there. The more the Good News gets out there, the more the world's ways are undermined. The more they are undermined, the less effective the world's ways are.*

*Fourth, name the mechanism wherever you see it. Look for scapegoating behaviour and name it. Do we have an Aboriginal problem in this country, or are we scapegoating indigenous Australians for the guilt in our own hearts? Do we have a terrorist problem in this country, or do we find the joy of common cause in having someone outside to blame?*

*And be careful about how we answer these questions, lest we only turn to scapegoating the government, or John Howard, or George Bush. Replacing one scapegoat with another is not what Jesus would do. Jesus did not accuse Caiaphas or Pilate for his own death.*

*Only the world accuses.*

*But the message of Jesus, which John reminds us is a message we have heard from the beginning, is that we are to love one another.*

*So, let us attempt to live lives worthy of our calling. Not by following the world's ways but as spiritual beings. Paul writing to the Roman Christians tells them not to follow the rituals of sacrifices of the Jews or the pagans, because these represent the world's ways. He says,*

*Worship God, in a way that is worthy of thinking, spiritual beings, by offering your bodies as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing to God. Do not model yourselves on the behaviour of the world around you, but let your behaviour change, modelled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do.*

*May we all discover what is the perfect thing to do, today and every day. A-men*