

July 20, 2008

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God

Are there any who would declare themselves to be against “peace”? Sociopaths aside, it would seem that “peace in our time”, if usually a pipe-dream, is nevertheless a universal one. There is much talk in our world about peace; and yet, “peacemaker” is actually not a very common term in our conversations. We do speak of “peace-keepers”, by which we mean military forces which perform the balancing and pacifying function of a well-organised and relatively harmonious state, when such a state and government is actually missing. Peace-keeping, in this sense, is really a matter of keeping violence and hostilities to a minimum, and is achieved by the implied threat of similar violence from the peace-keepers should things get out of hand. We also speak of “peace-workers”, third-party mediators who travel to troubled places to offer assistance in dialogue and improving mutual understanding, with a view a cessation of hostilities. A quick flick through a daily newspaper will turn up further familiar expressions to do with peace: peace deal, peace process, peace negotiations, peace efforts, peace agreement and so on. But “peacemaker” is relatively rare. In the last week the term appeared in *The Age* only once, as distinct from the scores of times those other more common expressions appeared. And even when it does appear, it usually means something more like peace-negotiator, or peace worker.

Now, we can hardly lament that these peace processes are going on all around the place, and that the techniques of and successes of mediation and negotiation are constantly being improved. Yet, when Jesus speaks of *peacemakers* here, something quite specific and different is meant. In most of our expressions to do with the creation of peace, we tend to locate the main cause of the problem, the crisis, the lack of peace *outside* of ourselves. And so, as we enter mediation or negotiation, we generally understand the *solution* to the problem to lie with the other party. The very conflict we seek to overcome arises from this presumption; in my assessment I *rightly* resist the other’s claim on me or mine. Whether I claim a “natural” right or a “divine” one, I defend myself, or attack another, because I believe that it is right or just to do so.

But with Jesus and his “peacemakers” we encounter something different. The peacemaker

does not mediate a peace, but *makes* peace. The difference might seem to be a subtle one, but it is important. The peace worker or peacekeeper seeks to be a disinterested third party who arranges a balance of the competing claims. It is her neutrality which fits her for the role. She stands between husbands and wives, parents and children, different racial groups or nations and helps the feuding parties to discover a vision of what is at stake which might be hidden to them because of their situation in the dispute.

But the *peacemaker* is one who is involved in a conflict, who has an interest in the outcome, and so who has, in his assessment, legitimate rights to assert. It is not these rights which make one a peacemaker, but the possibility of letting them go. For peace is never separable from justice. It is something of a commonplace these days to declare that peace is not the absence of war but the presence of justice. Tragically, it is not at all as common to declare that, in fact, in these terms, justice is impossible.

The impossibility of peace is not that people just can’t get along, but that their competing demands for justice cannot be reconciled. A colonising people cannot restore the stolen land and resources to the dispossessed indigenes, as just as the demand for such restoration might be, for colonisers themselves eventually come also to be able to claim rights to what has been taken. A developing nation cannot accept reductions in greenhouse gas emissions because of the concerns of developed nations anymore than those developed nations want to suffer reductions in their living standards. You or I might be able stand outside of particular such situations and declare how small or pointless the disputes might be in the big picture; but that is simply to declare that we don’t feel the force of those particular demands for justice. And so we don’t feel the sense of impossibility that things can be set right. For peace which meets all the demands of justice is impossible.

Yet the new thing, when Jesus speaks of peacemakers, is a peace which transgresses the demand for justice, and still sets right what is wrong. This is most clearly demonstrated in his own reconciling work. Although Christians are accustomed to speaking of Jesus as a “mediator” between God and humankind, this way of talking is misleading. It is not in the role of being *between* God and humankind that Jesus

"mediates", but *as* a human being, and *as* God. Jesus does not stand between two divided parties, but *is* those two parties; he embodies the conflict. There is no third party between those who are at enmity here. In the body of Jesus the demands of justice are stated. God demands faithfulness of humankind in Jesus, for this is God's right. Humankind, demands freedom from the divine claim in Jesus the Son, for this seems to us to be right.

But the important point is that *we* can't step outside *this* conflict and declare that God must have the right because he is God! It is, after all, for God's sake that Jesus is crucified. Jesus dies because it seems right and just to his executioners that this happen. As Bruce Barber reminded us last week, having eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, we have become arbitrators of justice with our half-baked knowledge of good and evil. There is no third party peace worker, no neutral peacekeeper, only God and us with our conflicting claims for justice.

Raw justice requires that the only possible outcome in the conflict between us and God is either that the one overpowers the other, or that

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On account of the faithfulness of God, it is this latter which is the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus. The impossibility of reconciling the conflicting demands for "justice" results in the death of Jesus, but also a kind of death for God also. If it can be said that humans rightly suffer and die for their failures before God and each other, it must be said that God "*unfairly*" suffers and dies; and yet *he does* die. If, of the two parties, God has done the right and his creatures have done the wrong, it is nevertheless *both* which suffer. And this is so because God has chosen to be God of we human creatures; and if we are lost then so is he.

To speak of resurrection in this context, then, is to speak of a restoring not only of a dead human being but of God himself. But more than a mere miracle of life out of death, resurrection is then a "legal" miracle – a bringing of peace *without*

justice, and yet still a real peace. Resurrection offends not simply our thoughts about the laws of nature but, much closer to home, it offends our sense of justice. God sets aside *his* just demand and raises the dead man Jesus – one who rightly died, according to our assessment. And in doing that he raises also us. For, if in the death of Jesus we are all proven wrong, and so dead in our sin, so also in the raising of Jesus does God also raise us (cf. Romans 5...) – an injustice for an injustice, which brings peace between God and us.

God is the peacemaker, because he willingly sets aside the demands of justice for a peace which justice could not deliver. As with which God makes, or creates, it is "out of nothing" – an impossibility which nevertheless occurs. To pick up a theme we visited a couple of weeks ago, hear a fragment of Portia's speech to Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:

*...in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy...*

The merciful one brings not simply peace, but a new kind of justice – a new being-right before each other which neither the application of the law nor the mere giving of concessions can achieve. It is the mercy of God that he makes peace with us, not simply by "forgiving and forgetting", but *through* our and God's remembering that we are forgiven, that the just demands of the law have been set aside.

In this new kind of justification, God does not so much make us *just*, as make it possible that we might ourselves become *justifying*. Having experienced God's unjust but peacemaking treatment of us, there is now the possibility that we might begin to do what God does, that injustice might be turned into the way towards peace. It is those who become such a peace-creating presence, denying their own claims to justice, who do as God himself has done, who are called "children of God". These "children", adopted into God's family through their being added to his Son, are those who are learning to deny themselves, to take up their cross, and to follow in the way of Jesus.

It is God's justifying setting aside of his righteous claims on us for the sake of love which enables us to stand before him. It is in doing as our heavenly Father does – being perfect as he is perfect – that we come to be called his children.

By the grace of God may the number of his children ever increase, and so also reign of peace. Amen.