

Philippians 2: 3-11
Pymble 29.4.18
Migrating our view of God

Last week we looked at how we best express our faith;
not so much as a list of carefully worded beliefs
but as a love-saturated way of everyday living.
We concluded by saying that a great way to view the Church is
as a school of love, where we learn to forgive, respect and care;
and to be kind, hospitable and compassionate.
It is not that beliefs are unimportant;
they are just subordinate to us living and practicing our faith
in loving deeds.

This week we are looking at the second migration
that Brian McLaren suggests is necessary for the Church
to be transformed to face a new era –
it is the *theological* shift in how we view God.
This is so crucial because the way we imagine God
informs how we live as Christian people.
If we imagine a domineering God
we won't be surprised to find our Churches are likewise domineering;
if we think that God resorts to violence to show his Lordship;
we won't be surprised to find Christians
resorting to violence to make their point;
if we think that God is male, we won't be surprised to find churches
that don't allow women to be ordained.
And so on.
As worshippers, we rightly want to imitate God.
Therefore what we imagine God to be, is so very important.

And our struggle as Christian people
is that our Bible contains multiple images of God –
and we have to be frank – many of them are violent and unhelpful.
Listen to how nine-year old Lucy names the paradox
we have in the Bible, as quoted in McLaren's book.

When I think about God I think of a person who would never murder or kill anyone. But when you think about it you wonder because wasn't it God who swept the angel of death over Egypt? It makes you think doesn't it? Is God against killing or is he not? I mean what had those boys done to die? It was the Pharaoh wasn't it? Now do you realise how little we know about God? I hope this made you think, thanks for listening. ¹

¹ The Great Spiritual Migration, Brian D McLaren, p. 121

Lucy, in her unsophisticated honesty,
identifies contradictions in the Bible that we, as adults,
know exist but are too quick to rationalize or overlook.
But we do need to confront the violence
that is both in our Bibles and is attributed to God
because if we don't
we will end up emulating that violence and even doing so in God's name.

That's why we heard from Deuteronomy 7 today –
to remind us of the violent command of God
to ethnically cleanse the land of Canaan.
The Hebrew people, entering the Promised Land,
were to show no mercy but to utterly destroy the tribes in the land,
smashing their altars, and breaking down their sacred places.
And there are plenty of other similar commands in Scripture.

So we require a more nuanced way of reading the Scriptures,
understanding that these are culturally-conditioned stories
and recognizing that the power of the message
is in the overall narrative rather than in every detail.
We need to appreciate the symbolism
and the metaphorical nature of much of the text.
McLaren is writing in a northern American context
where a strong Biblical fundamentalism
rails against talk of the Bible being anything but God's literal Word.
I do think in Australia; especially in the Uniting Church
we understand the need for this more nuanced view:
the need to take the Bible seriously but not literally.

Sadly over the millennia,
when the Church has been both powerful
and literal in its interpretation of the Bible,
it has been incredibly vicious.
McLaren takes a full chapter to educate and remind us
just how violent the Church's history has been.
To Jews, women and indigenous cultures the world over,
the Church – indistinguishable from the colonizing Empires –
has raped and plundered and destroyed so much in the name of God.
In 1455, at the beginning of the great era of discovery,
the papal proclamation read thus,

*“... invade, search out, capture, vanquish and subdue all Saracens (Muslims)
and pagans whatsoever, ... take all their moveable and immoveable goods... and
reduce them to perpetual slavery...”²*

² Ibid p. 83-84

This was our Church in mission just over 500 years ago!!

To show that this is a current problem and not just an historical one, McLaren relates a personal story.

I'm going to begin with the introductory paragraph. ³

Today when we, even unconsciously, imagine God exclusively male, exclusively white, all-mighty and warrior-like, we do great harm to women, other races, the poor and the powerless, especially those suffering at the hands of violent, despotic rulers. We may not be carrying the genocide card, but constantly reinforcing these types of exclusive images for God, can do great violence to those on the margins.

We need to grow and mature our view of God, in the same way as our outlook of the world grows and matures with age and experience. It is not so much that we simply reject Biblical images of God, but rather we read them as earlier understandings of God's nature. Like later rings of a tree that incorporate but outgrow the earlier rings, we understand those images are present but give them less credence in our current contexts.

Part of this maturing is also ensuring our beliefs are keeping pace with our Christian ethic of love and our growing and developing understanding of how that ethic operates in today's world. And when I say "today's world" I am referring to what love looks like in today's complex globalized world of gay marriage, increased migration and inequality, living with neighbours of other religion, or no religion at all. We need an image of God that moves beyond divine love for "our group" only; we need what McLaren calls the "inclusively we" God, which then breeds in us an "inclusively we" outlook. ⁴

And of course, this is exactly what we have in Jesus. Jesus is always the final say in our image of God. Now, I think we know that in theory but most of us find it difficult to put into practice.

³ Ibid p. 78 Chapter entitled "A loaded gun and a licence to kill"

⁴ Ibid p. 111

We find it difficult to see God eating and laughing
with tax collectors and sinners;
we struggle with God hanging around with prostitutes;
we battle with the non-violent God of Calvary
and we struggle with this self-emptying God
that we read about in Philipians.
But as Prof Bill Loader says, "Jesus is not the exception in the life of God" –
rather, Jesus now redefines how we are to think about God.
Jesus becomes the prime lens
through which we view the invisible God.
And where the New Testament stories reveal a Jesus somehow inconsistent
with the God of earlier centuries,
we allow the Christ-version to graciously supersede the older one,
appreciating that the older version may have been right for the time
but that Christ's fuller revelation
now brings God into greater focus and clarity.

And perhaps the defining characteristic of this Jesus
was his liberating ways;
from freeing those with evil spirits and life-threatening diseases,
to liberating the ways people thought about and kept the commandments.
From emancipating people from under the weight of religion
to naming his very purpose in Luke as
"bringing good news to the poor... proclaiming release to captives,
giving sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free."
In contrast to the violent God of domination
Jesus reveals a non-violent God of liberation.

It is this shift, this migration in our concept of God
that McLaren encourages all of Christ's followers to make.
We do so for the sake of the world that needs God's good news
and we do so for the sake of the Church,
to enable us to be the means by which
that good news is brought to the world.