

Sermon

Isaiah 28:14-22, Luke 13:22-30

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I am very grateful for the month-long summer vacation that is part of my agreement with the Vestry. This year it has been especially welcome as a time of rest and healing, but every year it is so welcome as a time to read. I loved Michael Ondaatje's novel *Divisadero*, which Bill's novelist daughter helped me to fully appreciate. I wasted time on part of *Word Freaks*, a book about obsessive compulsive Scrabble players; I dipped into some short stories. But the most important book I read was Dominic Crossan's *God and Empire*.

Crossan is a noted biblical scholar, but this book is not an academic treatise. It is, rather, Crossan's intense engagement with the God of the Bible and how violence as well as non-violence are presented throughout the Bible as attributes of God. His concern is for how Christians deal with this tension in a way that is faithful both to the God of the Bible and to the non-violence of Jesus – the one we call Savior.

Crossan lays out this tension that runs through the whole Bible – the tension between a wrathful God who punishes people and nations when they betray God and a loving God who converts people to God's ways through promises and appeals for faithful behavior. For Crossan, God is ultimately just, but God's justice comes in two ways. One is punishment – often violent to the point of utter devastation – like the Flood, or even in some of what Isaiah threatens in this morning's reading: “ I have heard a decree of destruction from the Lord God of hosts upon the whole land”. Even in our passage from the gospel, Luke has Jesus telling of how some will be locked out, how many who try to be saved will not – the old weeping and gnashing of teeth is right there. What kind of God is this? A God of vengeance, even a cruel God, it would seem.

But God's justice is also expressed in blessings and promises with seemingly no strings attached. God offers throughout the Bible, from creation through at least parts of Revelation (although that book includes some gruesome violence as well), the vision of a peaceable Kingdom where justice is realized through equality and no violence is necessary. Conversion and transformation come about through acceptance and forgiveness and love. This tension about how God deals with human failing is never reconciled – must we worship a God of both violence and non-violence, of both wrath and mercy?

Rather than just analyze the various texts and try to explain their ambiguity, Crossan does something quite different – he brings the tension right home – to us – to the way we are and to the way civilization has been throughout history. The tension between violence and non-violence, between punishing justice and merciful justice is here – in you and me and in our society. The Bible truly mirrors our experience. We are torn – so often, between justice as strict accountability – punishment or reward for behavior, and justice as an embrace of all people and a basic level of dignity, including life's necessities, for all.

As a nation, we clearly live with this tension. Sometimes we mete out harsh, violent justice to nations or groups that oppose or attack us. Sometimes we provide huge amounts of aid of all sorts to other countries in need and thus participate in non-violent transformation as a path to more justice.

Within our country, we struggle so hard to come up with a responsible way to deal with immigrants that is neither overly punitive nor too much of what some would call an amnesty – a path to legitimacy for the millions who are here illegally. It is really hard to figure out what is fair – nothing seems fair to all parties. And the Bible, because of the tension I've described, does not speak with a single voice about how a just God might shed divine guidance.

But, as much as anywhere, this tension is within ourselves. We see fairness so often in terms of retribution – getting back, getting even. And we also struggle to be accepting and to treat all people with respect and compassion, based on their worth as human beings and beloved creatures of God. This comes up with our kids; it comes up in the parish; it even comes up in traffic! Violence and non-violence, punishment and longing for conversion wrestle in me, in us, in the scriptures we call holy.

We are so surrounded in the media, in video games, in films and in our whole culture with vengeance and violence as ways of ensuring fairness. Surely, like me, you have at least fantasized about the punishment you'd like to see visited on someone who's wronged you, or perhaps some politician or other leader whom you feel has wronged our country. You've thought of how you'd like to get back at that person or see him receive his just deserts. We instinctively feel justice should be done in this way, and we can find support for this in the Bible. It's all there, not just the Old Testament, but in the New Testament – the Christian scriptures – as well.

In an odd way, argues Crossan, this tension in the Bible gives it authority because we are forced to examine the texts and choose for ourselves, just as we are forced to examine the circumstances of our lives and choose for ourselves. However, for Christians, our choices are rightly guided by Jesus. It is in Jesus, and his embodiment of a radically non-violent God that we see a path, a possibility for a new reality. It was new and possible in the jaded days of the corrupt Roman empire of Jesus' day; it is new and possible in the empire we inhabit today. Being a Christian involves choosing this way of doing justice whenever and wherever we can. When Jesus talked about God's Kingdom, he was talking about the age-old struggle for the world to move closer to God's dream for creation. Jesus saw this happening whenever there was healing, whenever there was forgiveness, whenever non-violence replaced violence as a way to bring about justice and peace. Jesus presented this choice to any who would listen. He got killed for it, and this choice is still too often crucified at the hands of the world today.

So what happens? In these endless months of campaigning before our next election, what do we hear that is really new, radically different, pointing us in a direction towards God's Kingdom vs. business as usual? Is it universal health care? Is it conversations between world leaders about our mutual interests and how they just might outweigh our age-old hostilities and fears? Is it recognition that beyond our

nation-states with our fortress mentalities and resource competition, we are one human family with one shared home, this planet earth? What are our choices, and which ones are consistent with the Kingdom Jesus offers?

What happens personally? Here's a small story about two neighbors struggling with an issue of justice - involving a small brown and white dog - my good old Tyler, may he rest in peace. He would occasionally escape from the house and race off, usually to a neighbor's a block away who had a dog. The neighbor, seeking justice, would call the pound and complain and have Tyler picked up. With each offense the fine increased, and, after three strikes, we had no more chances; Tyler was to be executed. I was livid, even though I knew this was the system - I felt this punishment was unfair. Feeling outraged, I went to talk to the neighbor and lecture her on how she should have called us first before reporting the dog so that we could have gotten him and avoided all this. To my mind, that's what neighbors should do, not resort to legal enforcement measures right away. But my elderly neighbor had quite a story. Her husband had only one leg and was terrified when their dog barked, thinking it was a burglar and that he would be powerless to defend them. They didn't even like this dog of theirs - it had been their son's who had been killed in Viet Nam, and they felt stuck with it. As I listened, I felt my anger soften, and sympathy for the woman begin to take its place. I assured her that we would make every effort to keep Tyler in, and if she would just call if ever Tyler returned, even if it was two in the morning, I would come immediately to retrieve him - I didn't want to upset them, but I also really wanted to keep my dog. Our conversation continued, and we discovered that we both went to Maine in the summer - we actually stayed only a few miles away from each other. I spotted a kayak in her yard - we found we both loved kayaking. She then offered to let me borrow her kayak - any time, she said, no problem! And, of course, she said she would call me rather than the pound about Tyler. And the pound gave him a reprieve. I've remembered this story because it seemed a time when justice was served - not through getting even and punishment - which is where it started, but through willingness to engage in conversation, hear each other's position and discover mutual interests that brought us closer and made it possible to agree on something that seemed fair to us both.

A small example, to be sure, but perhaps helpful in thinking about everyday occasions when we have the opportunity to make such choices. How, day in and day out, can we choose the radicality of God's Kingdom here and now, in our personal and corporate lives? How can we choose it in our life as a parish? This Kingdom, and Jesus as our gateway to this vision of God's world, are Christianity's great challenge to the world, and perhaps its greatest gift. Amen.