

Clashing Kingdoms and the Grey Zones

A sermon on John 18:33-37 by Nathan Nettleton, 22 November 2015

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Message

In a world increasingly divided between violent powers, Jesus leads a kingdom that is a radical peaceful challenge to both of them.

Sermon

In the current climate, it is rather uncomfortable to realise that we are followers of someone whose trial and execution would have reported by the mainstream media of his day as a necessary national security measure to deal with a religious extremist who had spoken of demolishing a major national monument and confessed to coming not to bring peace but a sword, and to seeking to establish a new religiously inspired kingdom that would undermine the social values of the nation. So are Jesus and his followers as delusional as ISIS? And if not, what exactly does Jesus have to offer in the face of present climate of violence and terror?

When Pilate interrogates Jesus and asks, “Are you the king of the Jews?”, he knows that it is a ridiculous question. Pilate is a politician who knows all about kings, and it his job to make sure that no new ones arise on his watch. It is perfectly obvious that this powerless and friendless prisoner is no such thing. But Pilate has read the charge sheet, and so he has to ask the question. Perhaps this bloke is deluded enough to *think* he is a king, and the seriously deluded can sometimes be seriously dangerous.

One of the debates about ISIS is whether we should even use that name, because when we call them *Islamic State*, we give some validity to their claim to be a state. The modern language of state and the ancient language of kingdom are both referring to the same thing. So when Pilate asks whether Jesus is a king, he is asking whether he is like ISIS – a dissident leader with an ambition to gain a territory and/or a people who will align themselves with him and against the Empire. And Jesus quickly incriminates himself when he says, “My kingdom is not from....” “So you *are* claiming to be a king then? Gotcha. Only one who claims to be a king can start splitting hairs over the nature of his own kingdom.”

And from Pilate’s point of view, it is very easily dismissed as splitting hairs. “My kingdom is not from this world.” Sure. ISIS would probably say exactly the same thing about their state. It is not from this world. It is from God. It is an extension of the kingdom of heaven. Some claim that a kingdom not of this world is just a kind of benign spiritual realm that we look forward to when we die, with no territorial or cultural claims in this world, but Jesus is making no such defence. He explicitly taught us to pray for his kingdom to come on earth as in heaven. He makes no attempt to persuade Pilate that his followers will always be loyal and patriotic citizens of the empire. He will be executed as an enemy of the state, and so will many of his followers.

ISIS’s strategy is not limited to gaining and holding territory. They are on about something much bigger too. You may have heard commentators saying in recent days that ISIS is seeking to eliminate the grey zone. What ISIS call the grey zone is actually where the vast majority of the world’s Muslims presently live, not aligning themselves with either of the black and white hostile extremes, but living peacefully alongside people of other faiths and no

faith. But ISIS wants to provoke a conflict that is so widespread and hate-fuelled that everyone is forced to vacate the grey-zone and take sides. And they do that in two ways.

In majority Muslim countries, they directly terrorise their fellow Muslims, claiming to be carrying out God's judgement against the worldly compromise of failing to take up arms against the unbelievers. And in majority non-Muslim countries, they deliberately provoke fear and hostility against Muslims, so that Muslims will end up feeling so alienated and persecuted that they will be driven out of the grey zone and into the arms of ISIS. And over and over, we see the western world cooperating perfectly with these aims. We see our politicians moving to clamp down on Muslim immigration and impose greater surveillance on Muslim communities. And, as we saw this morning in Melton and have been seeing recently in Bendigo, so called patriot groups exploit the fear and stir up exactly the sort of violent hostility against Muslims that ISIS wants. The United Patriots Front are not only the enemy twins of ISIS, they are dancing to ISIS's tune and carrying out their will, to the letter. And on the level of global military politics, we keep sending in more planes with more bombs, and more promises of "shock and awe" and a "pitiless war on terror", and what does it achieve? It simply inflames more terror. In 2002, the first year of the war on terror, there were 199 terror attacks around the world with a total of 725 people killed. Last year there were 13,500 terror attacks around the world with total death toll of more than 32,000 (US State Department figures [sourced here](#)). So thirteen years and 5 trillion dollars worth of war on terror has provoked a 6500 percent increase in the number of terror attacks. The western political-military establishment might as well be running ISIS's PR and recruiting campaign for it. Everyone seems to be intent on helping ISIS to eliminate the grey zone.

But how does the kingdom of Jesus relate to the grey zone? Is living comfortably and tolerantly in a secular and godless world being faithful to Jesus, or are we citizens of a kingdom that stands in opposition to the grey zone of the world around us? Was Jesus seeking to eliminate the grey zone when he said that we can't serve two masters, and that he came, not to bring peace, but a sword, and when he said that those who are not for us are against us, and when he declined to pledge that his followers would be faithful patriots of the empire? How do we, as followers of Jesus, differ from ISIS? Are we just enemy twins, on opposite sides of a grey zone that we both hate?

We followers of Jesus probably could be fairly charged with seeking to eliminate a grey zone, but the question would then be whether we are talking about the same grey zone. The answer clearly hangs on what Jesus meant when he said "My kingdom is not from this world." We've already seen that we can't hide behind the idea that Jesus is saying that his kingdom is a purely spiritual thing that makes no counter-claims against the kingdoms that are unmistakably from, in, and of this world. As Pilate well knew, the way kingdoms normally work in this world is that unless you are the first-born son of a reigning monarch, the only way to become a king is to violently overthrow the current ruler and seize power. By definition, kings are not elected. They conquer. The kingdoms of this world are born of violence and are maintained by violence or at least the threat of violence. And in case you think I'm overreaching to suggest that this is the difference that Jesus was pointing to, note that the one and only thing he says to Pilate to define what he means by his kingdom not being from this world is "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers *would be fighting*." And he could have added, "And, to be honest, my followers were confused about this too, but I ordered them to put away their swords."

So, in terms of this contrast of kingdoms that Jesus is pointing to, ISIS and the coalition of western nations are actually both the same sort of kingdoms. That's why the West knows no way to respond to ISIS other than with more bombs and more guns. The West condemns the naked savagery of ISIS's brand of violence, but then responds by trying to outdo them with spectacular shock and awe bombing campaigns and whiz-bang high-tech drone attacks.

But why does ISIS seem to glory in the barbarity of their own violence? When the West uses barbarous means of torture, it is mostly kept hidden and publicly denied. But ISIS films it and broadcasts it and glories in the savagery of it. What's going on? The answer is actually intensely religious. In a world that no longer equates violence with the hand of God, it is an attempt to escalate violence back to awe-inspiring god-like proportions. Jesus and the Hebrew prophets demolished the unanimous belief that our official violence was an expression of the sacred will of God. They exposed it as a lie and called us instead to hear the voice of the victims and recognise their innocence, and know that God stood with them.

So now the old system doesn't work. The threat of divinely sanctioned violence no longer functions to constrain chaotic violence, and we can't go back. Once we have seen the lie, we can't un-see it. We still try to persuade ourselves that the violence of our side is divinely justified and qualitatively different from the violence of their side, but no matter how loudly we shout it, somewhere deep down, we know it is a lie. Jesus has broken the only control system we trusted, and we have rejected his alternative, because we lack the courage to trust it. Loving your enemies, praying for those who persecute you, and forgiving those who crucify you lies beyond the imagination of most of us. They seem far too extreme and unlikely to protect us, and so we try to live in a grey zone. Even when the evidence tells us that continuing to hit back harder has produced a 6500% increase in the violence coming back at us, all we can think to do is ramp it up further. We are in fact doing much the same thing as ISIS. Glorifying extreme savagery in an attempt to give the violence back its lost sacred power. There is a gut level conviction that by escalating the violence to levels that are beyond shocking it will once again feel super-human and therefore divine and therefore good and pure. ISIS beheadings and the West's shock-and-awe campaigns are much the same. But in truth, both are just like shouting louder and louder as you become more and more uncertain. It is a desperate attempt to erase from consciousness the lie you can no longer un-see.

I'm not minimising for a moment the difficulty we have in trusting in the way of Jesus. It does feel wildly extremist. Those of us who were lucky enough to grow up in nice middle class suburbs in safe western nations grew up thinking that love your enemies meant don't throw stones at the Catholics down the street. We had long forgotten that the bloke who told us to love our enemies was facing a gruesome ISIS style crucifixion and he knew it. So we haven't really been prepared for the idea that loving our enemies means loving people who want to behead us or machine gun us in our cafes. I can stand up here and preach the words of Jesus, but I know there is a big part of me that would still prefer to live in a grey zone where I can revert to trusting in violence when the threats get too real. I noticed it in myself this past week. One half of me knows the violence always begets more violence, but there was another part of me this week guiltily hoping that these latest atrocities cause France and the US to send in massive ground forces to wipe out ISIS once and for all. Preaching peace would be so much easier if someone wiped out my enemies first. In my head, I know that would be the blood-stained Peace of Rome all over again, peace enforced by violence and simply breeding resentment and renewed violence. I know why it doesn't work anymore, but there are dark places in my heart where it is easier to believe in that than in the self-sacrificial way of peace

revealed in the crucified Jesus. So in truth, there is a grey zone here between the extremes of love and hate that Jesus is calling us to eliminate. There is a grey zone that those dark parts of my heart want to live in – a grey zone where the followers of the crucified prince of peace try to negotiate an agreement with the devil and his weapons. Jesus rejected this grey-zone temptation in the desert at the beginning of his ministry, and again when Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate offered it to him as a way out at the end, but we've been trying to build our houses and churches in this grey-zone ever since. Jesus calls us to be extremists when it comes to love. And now we are facing the ultimate irony that it is probably only by entirely eliminating our grey-zone of compromise with violence and retribution that we can really resist ISIS's attempts to eliminate what they call the grey zone, the places where love can take root, the places where peoples of different beliefs live in mutual respect, reconciliation and gracious hospitality.

So it is in these ordinary grey-zones of our ordinary lives that we have to start. You and I can't rewrite the foreign policies or military strategies of our nations. But we can stop waving flags and cheering when our nations bend their knees at the altar of violence. And we can recognise how weak our own knees become before that altar, and seek instead to be faithful ambassadors for the kingdom of the prince of peace, joining him in testifying only to the truth of extreme love and extreme mercy. And we can refuse to be manipulated into treating our Muslim neighbours with suspicion and hostility. We can ramp up our endeavours to express gracious hospitality instead. Even just a friendly smile to a stranger in the street could subvert some of the fear and hate that ISIS and the Patriots Front have sown. You might not be able to see whether she smiles back if she's wearing a veil, but so what? Add to your smile a prayer that she and her family will feel safe and welcome and valued here and you may have undone the power of one bomb. Organise a neighbourhood street party where Muslim and non-Muslim neighbours can welcome one another and share food and stories, and you'll be shaking the foundations. ISIS and the Patriots Front will hate that, because they can't even begin to understand the kind of resilient extreme hospitality that not only refuses to vacate the grey-zone but starts planting flowers and throwing parties in it.

“So you are a king?” Pilate demanded. And Jesus answered, “You are the one coming up with the king language. What I was born for, and what I came into the world for was to testify to the truth, and the truth is that the kingdoms of violence have run their race. The kingdom of God has drawn near, a kingdom not from this world, a kingdom of resilient and extreme uncompromising love, mercy and peace.” Come, Lord Jesus, come.