

Missing the Point

A sermon on Mark 9:30-37 & James 3:13-4:3,7-8a by Nathan Nettleton, 22 September 2024

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Message

Jesus offers himself to us to serve and bless us, and calls us to do the same in serving and blessing others.

Sermon

Violence in the streets, motivated by politics or religion, is something we are used to thinking of as happening in other parts of the world, but just a couple of weeks back, the protests outside the Land Forces arms expo here in Melbourne turned so ugly and violent that they made the CFMEU rallies look as genteel as the Moomba parade. Being anywhere near either of those would feel pretty intimidating to the average person in the street, and we are understandably disturbed and anxious when such things come so much closer to home.

Meanwhile, of course, terrifying stories continue to pour in from parts of the world that we prefer to think are not like us. In Lebanon, dozens of people are killed and thousands injured as booby trapped communication devices – pagers and walkie-talkies – simultaneously explode all over the country in a horrifying attack that Israel is not denying responsibility for. And in the USA, the presidential campaign has already been marred by two assassination attempts, one of which resulted in the deaths of innocent bystanders, and the polarisation continues to be fuelled as both sides ridicule and demonise each other.

The thing that all these scenarios have in common is the belief, on both sides, that WE are right and THEY are wrong and that their wrongness means that they have forfeited any right to be treated as human beings worthy of respect and care.

Most of the protesters outside the arms expo were protesting in support of the Palestinian people who have been targeted with weapons produced by some of the exhibitors. I totally understand that, and it is absolutely worthy of protest. But when one protester was asked by a journalist what he thought of the way attendees were being violently jostled by the protesters, he said “I don’t have a problem with that.”

He’s missing the point. The underlying problem with the arms expo and industry is that it promotes the view that violence, or at least legal state-sanctioned violence, is the answer. What that protester revealed in his answer is that he believes that too, and so instead of being part of the solution, he’s just picking sides and fuelling the problem.

But there’s a problem that I need to face here too. Truth be told, even as I make this critique, I am getting sucked into the same kind of thinking myself. I am pointing the finger at “them” and feeling superior, while they are pointing the finger at me and quite justifiably saying “Well at least we were trying while you didn’t do anything, you just let the arms expo go unchallenged. You’re a hypocrite, nothing but talk.”

Whether I am pointing the finger at the Israeli military and politicians, or the US political system and its proponents, or at the arms exhibitors or those who protest against them, there is every danger and every likelihood that I will get sucked into looking down on and disparaging “them” and imagining myself to be oh-so-much better, and thereby contributing

to the polarisation of the world and the fuelling of the fires of rivalry and hostility, and ultimately even hatred and violence.

If I..., If we allow ourselves to be sucked into such thinking, we will be missing the point, not only of the current events, but of our own sorry history of complicity in violence and division. And most importantly we will be totally missing the point of the example and teaching of Jesus. We will be undermining Jesus's mission of gathering and reconciling the whole world into one family in the love of God.

We won't, however, be the first followers of Jesus to have so missed the point. Missing the point of what Jesus was on about has been going on since the beginning. We heard a classic story of it a few minutes ago in our reading from the Gospel according to Mark. Jesus is explaining to his little band of followers that it is now inevitable that he will be betrayed and attacked and killed. Already last week we heard how Peter responded by arguing about it with Jesus and trying to tell him that he must have it all wrong.

In this week's episode, Jesus explains it again. This time he doesn't get an argument, but it is not because they get it now. In fact, we are told that they don't understand but that this time they are keeping their mouths shut about it. So instead we are shown how completely they don't get it. They get into a bit of an argument among themselves about which of them is the greatest. We're not told the details, but we can easily speculate.

"I've been following Jesus the longest."

"Yeah, but I'm the one he confides in when he needs to talk."

"Well I was with him when he was transfigured on the mountain."

"Yeah, well I'm the one who healed the most people when he sent us out to preach and heal."

"Maybe, but it was my preaching that brought in the most converts."

"Well, when we take on the Romans, you can preach all you like, but my skills with the sword will achieve a whole lot more for Jesus then."

And they've completely missed the point. But are we any better? Are we any closer to getting it? It doesn't seem so. Churches and their adherents are still constantly arguing over who is the greatest.

"Our church is more faithful to the whole teaching of the Bible."

"Yeah, well our church practices the true forms of baptism and the Lord's Table."

"So what? Nobody comes. Our church is the fastest growing in the country."

"But our church exhibits far more of the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

"Oh yeah? Well our church does a whole lot more for the poor and the needy."

And there we are, busy jealously comparing ourselves to one another and arguing over who is the greatest, putting each other down, and completely missing the point. Of course, it is not just church versus church. It happens just as much among individuals in the church.

"I tithe regularly and spend an hour a day in prayer."

"Yeah, well I've got a theology degree from a reputable college."

"But I've been baptised in the Holy Spirit and I speak in tongues."

"Well I've served as church secretary for 127 years and been at every church meeting and every working bee."

“Yeah, but I’m the one the pastor trusts with the important jobs.”

“So, I’ve been arrested like Jesus for civil disobedience when we protested against the war and I boldly trespassed on the military base.”

And there we are again, jealously comparing ourselves to one another and arguing over who is the greatest, and who doesn’t deserve much respect, and completely missing the point.

We’re missing the point firstly because such rivalries always inflame the hatreds and hostilities that cause chaos and violence to flare up around us. As the Apostle James said in our second reading tonight, “where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.” As soon as we claim to be greater, we are alleging that someone else is lesser or inferior, and before long we’ve got complete polarisation with hostile camps hurling insults at each other.

And we’re missing the point because most of the time we are still unable to get our heads around what Jesus was on about. When Jesus spoke about how he would be betrayed and arrested and killed, he wasn’t just predicting an unavoidable chain of events. He was also making a pledge of non-resistance. He was committing himself to avoiding the quest for greatness based in a competition of strength, or in the right and ability to use justifiable force or violence. He was seeking the reconciliation of the whole world into one family, and beginning by showing us the power of laying down our need to prove ourselves right and prove ourselves superior to others, or more powerful than others.

And just as his first followers couldn’t get their heads around the idea of a messiah who wouldn’t forcefully drive the Romans out of town and re-establish the patriotic throne of David, so we struggle to comprehend any idea of giving our allegiance to a messiah if it doesn’t involve proving ours to be the greatest religion or the greatest nation and winning everyone else to accepting our ways, our faith, our culture.

We too easily get sucked into the idea that the only ways to end the religiously motivated violence are to successfully convert everyone of other faiths to our “greatest” faith, or failing that, to send in the army to crush the violence with our “legal and justified” violence.

But Jesus’s response to the religiously motivated violence directed at him was to absorb it in his own body without ever reciprocating it. His response was to consistently reach out in love and forgiveness even to those who were attacking him. And in so doing, he opened up a new pathway to peace and invited us to follow. But a pathway to peace that is based in voluntarily relinquishing power continues to confuse and confound us, just as it confounded the first disciples.

So Jesus gives us all an object lesson. Taking a small child in his arms in the midst of them, he says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” This is a different story from the one about becoming like a little child. In this one, the challenge is to learn to welcome and honour the ones who have no power or status or influence as though they were Jesus himself.

Can we let go of our desire to associate with the celebrities, the movers and shakers, the ones who call the shots and make things happen, and instead privilege and honour those who have

no recognition or influence or fame? Can we offer ourselves in love and service to those who cannot repay us or boost our image?

Now, welcoming children and other less influential people is not, on its own, about to bring calm to the streets, ending inter-faith conflicts or political conflicts and bringing about an outbreak of peace and harmony. But our responsibility for religious peace-making begins at home. It is in offering ourselves in service of the little ones that we take our first steps in learning to offer ourselves in service of the whole world, as Jesus does.

And our contribution to peace between peoples of different faiths, different political stripes, and different ethnicities, will only come when we begin to see them not as targets to be converted or conquered or shamed or at least outdone, but as people made in the image of God who we are called to love and honour and welcome as we would welcome Jesus and the one who sent Jesus.

Jesus is calling us to be partners with him in blessing the world with love and mercy and generous hospitality. And the paradox is that the only way we get to be number one in that is by doing our best to make everyone else look like number one, starting with the children, and working our way up to those frightening people who are offended and angry and baying for blood in the streets.

And the only reason we have the opportunity to become part of the solution is that when we were part of the problem, part of the angry mob baying for blood, Jesus walked into our streets and took the worst we had to give, and came back to us with arms open wide offering that welcome and forgiveness and love and service.