

Backlash

A sermon on Acts 16:16-34 & John 17:20-26 by Nathan Nettleton, 2 June 2019
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Message

Whenever we are invested in the status quo, we are at risk of being caught up in seeing the liberation that Jesus brings as a threat to be opposed.

Sermon

Last weekend, a young woman was brutally murdered in a park, walking distance from my home, in a spot where I often walk my dogs. It's horrifying to realise that I had reason to say exactly the same thing less than a year ago.

The first time, there was a pretty strong public backlash against the police for making a statement about the need for women to take extra care. This time they were quickly on the front foot saying that violence against women is all about men's behaviour. In fact they were so quickly on the front foot with these statements that I couldn't help wondering what they would then say if it turned out that she had been murdered by another woman. But I knew in my heart that it was almost certainly a man.

Violence is violence, whoever perpetrates it, and I've been assaulted by violent women more than once. But that doesn't hide the fact that the overwhelming majority of violent assaults are perpetrated by men, and that male violence is far more likely to have lethal consequences. Courtney Herron and Eurydice Dixon were killed. The worst injury I've had was a broken nose.

But the hard statistical facts don't stop men from feeling unfairly portrayed in the rhetoric about male behaviour. I've been reflecting on that. I've experienced that feeling of resistance often. I find myself, like many others, wanting to say "Not all men". But I've also slowly come to recognise the uncomfortable truths that have led to that slogan being so vilified and condemned.

I promise to come back to that question, but let me first digress in a couple of other directions.

In our first Bible reading tonight, we heard a brief story about another young woman living life under the thumb of powerful men. She had some sort of clairvoyant gift, and she was being kept as a slave by men who were making great deal of money from people who were prepared to pay for her services. Christian preachers have often focussed on the dark spiritual dimension of this – her connection with the occult and perhaps demonic spirits – but even if that made her life worse, her basic situation was the same as that of women held in sexual slavery in illegal brothels. She was owned and controlled by powerful men who saw her not as a human being but as a piece of personal property, a resource to be exploited for profit.

When the Apostle Paul intervened, setting her free from the demonic spirit that made her profitable, the backlash from these powerful vested interests was immediate and savage. Paul and Silas were arrested by a mob, dragged before the magistrates, accused of un-Australian behaviour – sorry, un-Roman behaviour – stripped naked, beaten up and jailed in irons.

Powerful profiteers do not take kindly to anyone interfering with their cash flow. They don't see anything to rejoice over in a young woman being given her life back. They don't object to a bit of harmless religious eccentricity. They didn't regard it as a problem when she was following Paul and Silas around, yelling out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." A bit of religion can be good for business. The opiate of the masses and all that. Keeps everybody happy and spending. Just don't let religion start meddling with business. Or with politics.

We've recently elected a church-going evangelical Christian as our Prime Minister. When pressed during the election campaign, he said, "[I don't mix my religion with politics or my faith with politics, and it's always been something that has informed how I live my life and how I seek to care for and support others.](#)" So by keeping his religion confined to the private realm and out of reach of his politics, he can let it inform how he personally seeks to care for and support others, without it threatening to interfere with how his government seeks to refuse care and support to others, to our first nations peoples, to asylum seekers, and to the thousands of people stuck on endless waiting lists for public housing.

When one of those people ends up murdered in the park, we'll gather in vigil and lay flowers on the spot, but the Prime Minister knows that most of us will vote for tax cuts in preference to funding a huge investment in public housing infrastructure and rehabilitation services. And with his religion quarantined from his politics and informing only his private behaviour, he can continue to profit at the ballot box from exploiting our racism, our fear of outsiders, and our selfishness. Powerful vested interests continue to set the agenda, and a little religion is a fine thing, so long as it doesn't mix or interfere. Light candles and lay flowers by all means, but don't interfere.

Powerful vested interests are relatively easy to identify and critique when they exhibit themselves as obvious wealth and power – Clive Palmer splashing around his millions to help secure his interests in parliament. But all of us have our own vested interests, and they can be working very powerfully within us, even if they don't have much power in the outside world.

If you are willing to learn to recognise your own vested interests, follow the backlash. What is it that provokes an angry reaction in us? What is it that we instinctively reject as going too far, as threatening our cherished values? We might not be in a position to drag anyone before the authorities, or have them beaten up and jailed, the way the slave owners of Philippi did, but what changes do we find ourselves resisting and defending ourselves against?

You see, just to stick with the example of the slave owners for a moment, in various times and places around the world, slavery has just been an accepted part of the way things are. Christians have been slave owners, and have been able to point to the Bible and claim that it doesn't take a clear stance against slavery. And whenever things are just an accepted part of the way things are, those of us who are involved don't see ourselves as evildoers. We see ourselves as good people who are doing the best that we can in the world as it is, a little flawed though it may be. And unless someone threatens to change things, we are usually fairly oblivious to just how much the scales are tipped in our favour.

And because we can't clearly see the imbalance, and in fact can't afford to see the imbalance, when an Apostle Paul comes along and liberates our slaves, we instinctively see ourselves as the victims, and we denounce these interferers as disturbers of the peace, and as un-

Australian or un-American or un-Roman or whatever, and as advocates of radical extremist views that will destroy society as we know it.

Follow the backlash, and we start uncovering our own vested interests. I know that sometimes when I am talking with Uncle Den or other indigenous friends, I find myself internally resisting and reacting to things they say about how their people have been dispossessed and how we need to change Australian society to give back to the first nations peoples significant control over how society is structured and run in this land. I find myself internally rehearsing the reasons why that is impractical. I find myself internally absolving myself of responsibility for what my ancestors did, and turning a blind eye to the privileges I am enjoying that are grounded in that history of violent land theft and cultural destruction.

When it is a big public political policy, I can see it clearly. I can see the hypocrisy of national policies of closing our borders to boat people and resisting foreign influences in our culture when the modern Australia that we claim to be defending was itself founded by a bunch of boat people who violently imposed their culture and law on the real Australians. I can clearly see it on that scale, but when asked to acknowledge and change the ways that I continue to feel entitled to my cultural privileges, I sense a backlash stirring inside. I need to follow the backlash to uncover my own vested interests.

To return to where I started, it is the same when I find myself resisting the messages about men's behaviour and men's entitlement and how they contribute to a culture of deadly violence against women. I like to think of myself as one of the good men, and I'm not a perpetrator of physical violence against women, except perhaps in the safe and controlled confines of my Tae Kwon-do class, where more often than not I am made to look weak and helpless by women who are much younger, fitter, faster and more skilled than me.

But in the real world outside that class, not being a perpetrator doesn't mean I'm not a beneficiary of a long long history of male supremacy. Lots of nice sounding language about traditional roles and traditional families and traditional values is actually masking an all too traditional major injustice. And we men are mostly blind to it in exactly the same way that slave owners and colonists were blind to their assumptions that the way things are and the way things have traditionally been is self-evidently the way they should be.

Follow the backlash, and see what it is that is feeling threatened. In fact there is little doubt that much of the male hostility and violence towards women in our own day is an expression of the backlash itself. Men who do not understand why the rights and privileges they have taken for granted for generations are being challenged and taken away lash out in frustration and anger. We need to follow the backlash in order to uncover our own complicity in "traditional" injustices. We need to follow the backlash to uncover the places where we are reacting to the liberating work of the Holy Spirit of Jesus as though it was a threat to all we hold dear.

And at risk of losing all my brownie points, let me briefly take the risk of presuming to speak across these divides too. This need to follow the backlash to uncover our vested interests is no longer confined to the traditionally dominant and privileged side. As we have become increasingly conscious of the victims of our traditional injustices, victimhood has become a paradoxically privileged position. That's why we see angry men trying to depict themselves as the unfortunate victims of political correctness gone mad, or whatever. Being a victim has

become strangely desirable, because the victims are largely exempted from scrutiny or critique. It's not actually true that if it weren't for men, women would be universally loving, gentle and peaceable. It's not actually true that pre-colonisation indigenous cultures were the unblemished garden of Eden. And when we feel ourselves bristling at such statements, we may need to examine whether it is another backlash that needs to be followed to see whether we have vested interests under threat.

What happened in Philippi when the Apostle Paul set free the slave girl was no isolated instance. There is almost no situation of injustice or human misery that isn't propping up someone else's privilege and entitlement, and in most cases they will be blind to it until it is actually challenged. And when it is challenged, our reactions are usually the same as those of the powerful men in Philippi. "This is outrageous. This is a threat to our traditions, our culture, our religion. This must be stopped." And so over and over, we find ourselves instinctively opposing the liberating work of Jesus, as did most of the people around Jesus.

Our Prime Minister is entirely wrong in thinking that following Jesus can be quarantined from issues of public policy and social change. Jesus came proclaiming the inbreaking of the culture of God into our society, here and now, and the culture of God challenges all our privileges and entitlements and unrecognised traditional injustices. God is not the author and upholder of the status quo. The God made known to us in Jesus advocated cultural change to an extent that saw him denounced and condemned as a threat to society and religion. The Apostle Paul's experience in Philippi shows us that defensive backlash continues to be our instinctive response to the liberating mission of Jesus.

But Jesus continues to reach out to us and invite us to get on board. Because despite our instinctive conservative response that fears being the losers in these changes, Jesus is actually just as intent on liberating us as anyone else. As we heard in our gospel reading tonight, Jesus's prayer is that the love of God will be in us, and the glory that God has given to Jesus will be given to us too. Jesus has no desire to humiliate or dispossess any of us. Jesus is inviting us into a new world where everybody is showered equally with love and dignity and respect and freedom and glory. Even wealthy, powerful, white males will be far better off in such a world, although perhaps not in ways that they have been conditioned to be able to recognise yet.

We gather around this table because Jesus has prayed that we will be one and invited us to gather, to lay down both our privileged power and our privileged victimhood, and to remake the world in the image of the bread we break here. We've all got things to lay down before the world is fully made safe for the likes of Courtney Herron and Eurydice Dixon, but the liberating work of Jesus will not rest until all are free, and love and respect and compassion shape all our personal relationships and all our political and social policies. For the coming of that day on this, we work and pray.