

Not Feeling Rejected Enough?

A sermon on Mark 8:31-38 by Nathan Nettleton, 25 February 2024

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Message

In an increasingly polarised world, championing the radical love and mercy shown by Jesus is likely to bring hostility from all sides.

Sermon

At our Lenten Retreat Day last Sunday, we spent some time reflecting on a passage from the 15th chapter of John's gospel that included Jesus saying, "I have chosen you out of the world – therefore the world hates you. ... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you."

One of the things that was said as we shared our reflections was that we found it difficult to relate to that statement because none of us were experiencing ourselves as being hated and persecuted.

Some Christians respond to this by trying to provoke hostility. They try to push their faith on others in such arrogant and disrespectful ways that people inevitably start hating them, and then they congratulate themselves for living up to these words. Others respond by redefining persecution, and they begin to imagine they are being persecuted if people disagree with them, or treat their faith as a bit of a joke, or no longer regard Christianity as deserving a special privileged voice in our society. These things are not even remotely like the persecutions the early Church was talking about.

Jesus's words in tonight's gospel reading raise similar questions. Once again he describes himself as inevitably being subjected to hatred, rejection, persecution and even being killed, and then he goes on to say that any of us who wish to be his followers must be ready to face the same. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Taking up your cross did not and does not mean wearing a decorative cross-shaped piece of jewellery round your neck. Nor does it mean stoically enduring some ordinary difficulty that comes your way. The people to whom Jesus addressed these words were familiar with seeing people literally taking up their crosses and being crucified. Crucifixion was a gruesome execution that the Roman occupation forces used, reserving it usually for those who were convicted of political or revolutionary crimes. Stand up against the empire, and this was how they made an example of you. It was gruesome and barbaric, and in that culture, Jesus's words could have no other meaning to his hearers than "be prepared to cop that."

So what does that mean for us, when most of us are not coping any significant hatred or persecution, and are not in any likely danger of being executed or murdered on account of being followers of Jesus? Has the world really changed that much, or have we just sold out and gone all wishy-washy and blandly inoffensive?

I've been pondering this question more since last Sunday's retreat, because I am certainly one of those who is not experiencing rejection and persecution. As I've pondered, I've realised something that seems to make this lack of hostile opposition even more surprising. And that is that we seem to be living in a time of increasing polarisation and rage. More and more it

seems like everybody is forced to take sides, see everything in simplistic black-and-white terms, allow no hint of nuance or uncertainty, and be very hostile to those who don't take the same side.

We saw this happening in Australia with the same sex marriage debate. One of my friends who had been a prominent gay rights activist in the 70's and 80's had always seen marriage as an oppressive hetero-normative construct that the gay community shouldn't want anything to do with, but by the time we got to the fractious debate in 2017, he said that it was no longer socially permissible to be anything other than for or against, and if he remained against, he was seen in his own community as being anti-gay.

We saw it again, disastrously, in the recent referendum on an indigenous voice to parliament. The so-called "progressive no" case was routinely dismissed, as all nuance was purged from the arguments, and it just became for or against with both sides disparaging one another.

We can see it in the USA where politics and political identity has become so polarised that neither side can even seem to recognise the basic humanity and right to exist of those on the other side. The foundations of democracy are crumbling because democracy has always depended on the losing side's capacity to accept being governed by the winners, and that's falling apart. Donald Trump didn't cause this either, he's just shamelessly exploiting it as it emerges.

And we are seeing it all over the world in the responses to the Israeli attacks on Gaza after the Hamas attacks on Israel. If ever there was a situation where right and wrong were more obviously shared by both sides, I don't know what it was, and yet most of the public discourse appears to proceed on the assumptions that we all have to take sides and unquestioningly back our side no matter what they do.

Many Christians seem to not only buy into this idea that you have to be all-in for one side, but also seem to take it for granted that Israel has to be their side. I suppose this is understandable since our faith formation is so shaped by scriptures that emerged from the land of Israel. Many of us have spent decades reading and praying these scriptures, and interpreting the references to Israel as references to us. So we kind of identify with Israel, as though they were our tribe.

And for some Christians, this even goes a step further in a weird kind of prophesy thing where, although they probably wouldn't say it this way, the underlying assumption seems to be that biblical prophesy was not entirely fulfilled in Jesus, but is fulfilled in Jesus and in the re-establishment of the nation-state of Israel in 1948. And so that sense of close association of our faith with Israel makes it hard to acknowledge that Israel can do wrong. So many of our founding stories cast Israel as the victim of atrocities committed by other world powers that it is hard to contemplate the possibility that Israel might currently be a powerful perpetrator.

But my point here is that, whatever the balance of rights and wrongs might be on this issue, it is another issue that is fracturing our social cohesion and causing waves of hostility and division, the likes of which we haven't often seen in this country.

And all those examples of increasing social polarisation – and of course I could list of many more – all of them tell us that, if we Christians are not experiencing hostility or persecution,

it is not because the world has become so harmonious and cohesive and tolerant of difference that such divisions never happen any more. Much more likely then, it is because we are not actually perceived as different in any significant way, in any way that makes anyone feel threatened or uncomfortable.

Now of course, if being hated and persecuted was the name of the game, a goal in itself, then we could easily get people offside by being rude, disrespectful, arrogant, and unpleasant, and there are some Christians who seem to take that approach in order to reassure themselves that they are being persecuted like Jesus. But being persecuted is not the name of the game. It is not the end goal. Jesus said that his followers are to be known for their love: their love of one another, their love of their neighbours, even their love of their enemies who hate and persecute them. And that, of course, is what we see in Jesus himself.

So as I continued to ponder that at last Sunday's retreat and on into the week, I got to asking myself what was it about the love and mercy that Jesus showed that resulted, not in love reciprocated, but in hostility and even violence. And what was it of whatever that was that I'm not showing to any significant extent and which therefore leaves me living without ruffling too many feathers.

As I pondered that, I realised that the big thing was that Jesus was repeatedly seen to be loving the wrong people. He loved those who others thought should be shunned and rejected, because to do otherwise would encourage them and lead to them polluting and corrupting all that we hold dear in our society. To do otherwise would be to break down our sense of who we are and what we stand for.

The obvious example here is that Jesus was frequently criticised and condemned for his positive generous relationships with "prostitutes and sinners". These were people whose values and behaviour were regarded as beyond the pale by the good respectable pillar-of-the-community types. Jesus didn't encourage their hurtful or self-destructive behaviours, but he did ensure that these people felt loved, accepted, and protected in his presence.

A few decades ago when I was working at the House of Hope in St Kilda, I did have quite a few friends who were prostitutes and petty criminals and substance abusers. There were prostitutes and petty criminals on the guest list at Margie's and my wedding. But I don't think anyone hated us for that the way they did with Jesus. Why not, I ask myself.

Here's the thing; I was being paid to have good relationships with those people. It was categorised as charity, as a special ministry. Even if I hadn't been being paid, it probably would have been seen as some kind of admirable voluntary ministry, still a form of charity. I don't think anyone ever thought that these were the people who I'd be hanging out with much of the time if I hadn't been involved in that ministry. And I know in my heart that that's true.

From the way people responded to Jesus, it seems safe to conclude that he didn't make them feel like simply the objects of his charitable ministry. If he had, that probably wouldn't have caused any trouble. Israel had always seen charity and almsgiving as an admirable religious duty. The problem was that Jesus treated the prostitutes and sinners as though they were the equals of the decent religious people. And that got the decent religious people seriously offended.

There was another way that Jesus was seen to be loving the wrong people too. I noticed this one when I began thinking about the times when Jesus aroused instant hostility. The obvious one was his first sermon in his home town of Nazareth when, by the time he had finished, the congregation had morphed into an angry mob that tried to drag him out and throw him off a cliff. When you look closely at what he was saying, you realise that once again he is saying that those who we regard as “not like us” are in fact equal to “us” and just as loved by God as us and equally to be loved by us.

Jesus refers to two specific places as having experienced some blessing of God, and those places are both outside of Israel, in Lebanon and in Syria. He was saying that the God who we regarded as the God of Israel was just as likely to bless and work through Lebanese people and Syrian people.

Or think of his parable on another occasion about the good samaritan. Samaria is the name that many Zionist Israelis still use for part of the occupied Palestinian territory in the West Bank. The hostility between Israelis and the Palestinians of Samaria goes back even further than the time of Jesus, but here was Jesus, speaking to an Israeli congregation, holding up a Palestinian man as the God-given model of neighbourly love that God is calling us all to emulate. The image of God is seen in this man, who you fear as a potential terrorist, every bit as clearly, and in his actions here perhaps more so, as in those you regard as the chosen people of God.

It's often difficult for us in Australia to imagine ourselves into the intense feelings of the tribalism that makes that so shocking to his hearers, because we don't usually see ourselves as having clear natural enemies in that way. In reality, this is often because we live in comfortable bubbles from inside of which we are barely aware of the existence of those we regard as dangerously unlike us. But we are certainly not immune.

If you've not experienced it, try this little experiment. Next time you hear someone talking about the importance of buying Australian made products, ask them why jobs for Australian workers are any more important than jobs for Chinese workers, and see what sort of reaction you get. In fact, you'll probably baulk at even saying it, because you know exactly what kind of reaction you'll get. Xenophobic Australian tribalism is never that far beneath the surface.

The kind of love that provokes the kind of hostility that Jesus copped is the kind of love that threatens our identities that are built on solidarity with our own in-group. It is the kind of love that says, loudly and unapologetically, that those people who we have defined ourselves as different from, better than, are every bit as valuable and loved by God and to be loved by us, as “us”.

When I'm honest with myself, I know I only rarely exhibit anything like that sort of tribe-defying love. And those of us on the progressive left end of the spectrum are usually no better at this than those of us on the conservative right of the spectrum. Whatever our ideology, we tend to mainly spend our time in the company of those who share our views and our values. And we think that we are better, and closer to God, than “them”. And if Jesus came along and began treating them as our equals, showing no preference for us over them, we'd be mighty offended. We might even be at risk of becoming the hostile mob thinking he was a traitor who needed to be got rid of.

And notice something else about the persecution Jesus faced, something that those who seek to provoke persecution for its own sake usually overlook. The persecution Jesus faced came mostly from his own people. Christians today who make a big deal about persecution are almost always seeing themselves as persecuted by non-Christians. And sure the persecution of Christians by the ancient Romans happened, but not on any significant scale until a century or so after Jesus. Jesus was persecuted by his own people, those who shared his religious identity, the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes. Precisely because he said that our religious identity doesn't make us any better than others. God's love is just as real for those who reject everything we stand for, for the feared and despised "others".

So as we journey through Lent, through this season of self-examination and repentance, let us seek to open ourselves to the shockingly radical love and mercy of God, and allow ourselves to be opened up by that love and mercy to those who our tribes and our social conditioning have shaped us to disregard and distance ourselves from, and let us learn to expand our love and mercy out to places and peoples that will probably get us into trouble with those we are used to being accepted and affirmed by, taking up our own crosses. For it is in that kind of love and mercy that we will find ourselves with our feet firmly planted in the footsteps of Jesus on his journey to the cross and to the wide open spaces of resurrection life beyond the cross.