

Could it be a Conspiracy Theory?

A sermon on Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 & Mark 1:14-20 by Nathan Nettleton, 24 January 2021

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Message

Although we can't prove that our faith isn't another crackpot fraud, we can provide evidence by living lives of love, hope and hospitality.

Sermon

What if the gospel is a big conspiracy theory? What if it is just weird alarmist shit that has been made up and has sucked in an awful lot of people?

Our world seems to be full of conspiracy theories at the moment. Two and half weeks ago, the US Capitol building was stormed by an angry crowd, many of whom had shirts or banners proclaiming one or more major conspiracy theories. The COVID pandemic has spawned numerous conspiracy theories, ranging from those who think that the whole thing is a hoax and doesn't exist, through to those who think the virus is being deliberately released and spread to reduce the population.

A week or two back, several of us in this church received a letter from a former member of our church telling us that she and her husband had been receiving prophetic revelations about a coming global crisis and that they had been called by God to warn people to prepare by stockpiling food, fuel and survival necessities.

Last Monday I had a phone call from a guy who sounded perfectly reasonable except that he too was telling me how important it was to prepare for a coming global catastrophe and that an astronomical event in 2017 was a confirming sign spoken of in Revelation 12. He told me that millions of Christians all over the world were talking about this sign, which was a bit of a surprise to me since I'm usually reasonably in touch with what Christians are talking about, and I'd never heard of it.

Most bizarre of all is the QAnon conspiracy theory which has had millions of people buying into the idea that they are engaged in a conflict against a cabal of Satan-worshipping cannibalistic pedophiles who are running a global child sex-trafficking ring. Like a kind of doomsday cult, they believed that on Inauguration Day, last Wednesday, Donald Trump and the US army would seize power, expose the pedophile ring, and lock up Joe Biden and hundreds of other alleged pedophiles.

The QAnon people are, understandably, in complete disarray now. Their D-day came and went, and nothing happened. Donald Trump moved to Florida. Joe Biden moved into the White House. The great storm, the holy war, never eventuated. So now what?

Well, it is early days, but so far it appears that what is happening is exactly what research says usually happens when any kind of doomsday cult sees its nominated doomsday pass without incident. There are some who are being quite honest and realistic and saying, "It's over. We were wrong. It's time to get back to our lives as best we can." There are a great many who are really shocked and bewildered and who might yet end up following the realists, or following some of the others. The others are the scary ones. As [Tony Wright wrote in yesterday's paper](#), evidence shows that "when a cult leader announces the date of the end of the world or

suchlike, the faith of the truly faithful is not shaken when the day comes and the apocalypse fails to occur. The believers simply change the narrative.”

At this early stage, of course, the believers have split around various competing new narratives. Some say that it was all true, but that the enemy was so powerful that Donald Trump has been defeated, at least for now. Some said that it is just a delay and that anyone in the group who doesn't maintain faith in the Donald's second coming should be expelled from the group or even killed. Others have decided that perhaps Joe Biden is the saviour after all, and that now he will be the one to defeat the pedophile cabal.

One of the scary parts, is that in the aftermath of such a crushing disappointment, the mental energy that goes into reaffirming the faith tends to further radicalise the believers, and their beliefs and the actions they will be prepared to take become more and more extreme, volatile, and dangerous.

So what has all this got to do with the gospel, and with us as followers of Jesus?

Well, if we are really honest about it, all three of today's bible readings contained elements which sound like things that we sometimes associate with these kind of crazy cults and grand conspiracy theories. So how can we be sure we are not being sucked in too? What if the answer is, “we can't.”

The story we heard from the prophet Jonah is one that, if we set it in today's world, we would almost certainly be talking about a crackpot doomsday prophet. Jonah walks through the big city of Ninevah crying out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be destroyed!” Notice please, that he doesn't say, “Unless you repent, the city will be destroyed.” He just sets a date, forty days hence, when the city will meet its doom. If we were reading this story from the front page of the sceptical Ninevah Daily Bugle, we would no doubt read that forty days passed, and nothing happened. Jonah was wrong. But we are reading it from a religious text that held that Jonah was a true prophet, and so it offers an explanation, even though it surprisingly also admits that Jonah himself was shattered by the absence of destruction.

And again, if we are going to be really honest about it, the explanation that we are given is one that turns up very frequently in that research into how doomsday believers change the narrative when the day passes without incident. The new narrative is that because enough people believed Jonah and repented and prayed hard, God relented and spared them the calamity that would otherwise have come.

Now any sceptic can see that the beauty of this change of narrative is that it is a cyclic argument that can't be proved wrong. Even though the believers can't prove that the disaster would have come, the sceptics can't prove that it wouldn't have come if the sincere prayer of the believers hadn't saved them all from doom. Both sides are simply expressing their faith in the beliefs that they happen to be committed to.

If we jump across to our reading from the letter to the Corinthians, we heard the Apostle Paul saying, “the appointed time has grown short, ... the present form of this world is passing away,” and that therefore the believers should behave in ways which sound quite strange, and which we would not normally regard as signs of being emotionally well adjusted and spiritually healthy. If you are married, behave as though you aren't; if you're grieving, behave

as though you aren't; if you're rejoicing, behave as though you aren't, and if you own property or you are in business, behave as though you had nothing to do with them. I think you can agree with me that if one of your relatives came home and said they were following a new guru who said those things, you'd be much more worried than proud.

Even when we turn to our gospel reading, with its story of the beginning of Jesus's ministry, we have potential cause for concern. We have people giving up their jobs and families to follow this unknown guru figure who promises to send them fishing for people. Hands up who likes it when zealous religious types coming fishing for you. No me neither.

It's actually a quite surprising image for Jesus to use too, because the prophet Habakkuk (1:15) used it as a thoroughly negative violent image, saying of the Babylonian invaders that they "catch people with hooks, as though they were fish; drag them off in nets and shout for joy over their catch!" Whatever Jesus meant by it, there is no denying that it has been used by many religious zealots to mandate an aggressive and insensitive style of religious recruiting.

So before we go rushing to find ways to defend ourselves and differentiate ourselves from the crackpot QAnon crowd, let's first admit that our sceptical critics have got plenty of evidence on their side. Not only is there, as Jesus predicted, a very long history of self-proclaimed prophets jumping up in the name of Jesus and calling people to follow them and give up everything to prepare for a coming day of fiery judgement, but the scriptures that we read and listen to seven days a week here in this Cyber Chapel contain a multitude of examples of this kind of apocalyptic thinking and of changing narratives when things don't turn out as the prophecies predicted. There is no point in us trying to deny that. It's awkward and uncomfortable, but it's true. Let's confess to that.

So where to from here? Can we prove that what we believe is true? Have you noticed how when QAnon is mentioned in the media, it is nearly always prefaced with the phrase "disproven and discredited conspiracy theory"? Can we prove that what we believe and follow is not just another massive fraud that equally deserves the label "disproven and discredited"?

Actually, no, we can't. We can't prove it. If it could be proved, we wouldn't call it a faith. Faith is always a step into the unknown, a step beyond the verifiable evidence. That doesn't mean there is no evidence. I have the evidence of my own experience, but I don't have anything that would rate as proof to a determined sceptic. Don't waste your time on a quest for that kind of proof.

Where I think we can go with honesty and integrity is to suggest that what we believe can be judged by its fruits, as Jesus himself suggested. In tonight's reading, we heard him announcing that the kingdom or culture of God has come near. So what kind of culture is this belief system of ours producing among us? What kind of fruit is it bearing?

This is still a fraught and complicated response, because many of the crackpot cults and conspiracy theories have taken root among people who use the same bible as us and claim to be following Jesus. Many of the QAnon people and many of the white supremacists claim allegiance to Christ. Those who invaded this land in 1788 and waged a genocidal war against the First Nations believed that British dominion was the will of God. So we need to be humble, and careful not to over-claim.

We need to be aware that anything we might claim about a culture of love and mercy and hospitality that is born of our faith is a claim that we then have to live up to. Unless it is actually bearing fruit in our lives, we still have no answer and others can quite reasonably lump us in with the QAnon mob.

But if and when we are genuinely following in the footsteps of Jesus and living and loving as he calls us to, we can, I believe, identify clear differences in the culture that emerges from our commitment to Jesus and the culture that emerges from belief systems like the QAnon conspiracy.

When I look at the faces gathered here, I don't see people who are disappearing down rabbit holes of paranoia, hostility and aggression. As we saw on January 6th, QAnon and some of its neighbouring ideologies have an apocalyptic belief in a day of righteous violence, and so are prone to erupting into violent anger and insurrection.

Now we have to acknowledge that there is violent apocalyptic imagery in our Bible, but when we learn to read it with Jesus and through the story of Jesus, we find that his use of that imagery consistently subverts the genre so as to reveal that his, and our, only involvement in violence is to be in suffering it, and never in perpetrating it. So the culture of God in which we seek to sink our roots will certainly call us to challenge injustice and work for social change, but will never mandate angry mobs howling for the blood of traitors. We follow in the footsteps of one of the victims of such a mob, not one of the leaders.

When I look at the faces gathered here, I don't see people who are isolating themselves, and insulating themselves from alternative views. The fishermen in our gospel story left their families and the family business to follow Jesus. That was a pretty big deal. It still is. Love of family and loyalty to family are among the most deeply entrenched values in every human society. The way of Jesus does seem to regard any kind of unquestioning family-first attitude as a form of idolatry, but it never calls us to reject and shun our family members for not sharing our beliefs.

Cults, on the other hand, usually demand that their adherents sever contact with unbelieving family and friends. It is part of creating the echo chamber in which crazy beliefs can thrive. Some bewildered QAnon supporters this week were reportedly saying, "It doesn't make sense that we've all been played." But actually it does, because one of the ways that we can get ourselves played is by shunning the company of anyone who would ask the questions we need to face up to.

When I look at the faces gathered here, I don't see people who are increasingly suspicious and defensive and exclusionary. More than anything else, the culture of God is a culture of love and mercy and radical hospitality. It doesn't call for walls to be built, and outsiders to be driven away, and enemies and unbelievers to be killed. It calls for a love and acceptance that are so radical and all-inclusive that those who demand that we be family-first and nation-first actually see it as treasonous.

The way of Jesus doesn't just set these things up as near-impossible ideals though. It also shines a revealing light on how and why we are so vulnerable to getting ourselves caught up in the insular hostile mob thinking that underpins so many cults and conspiracy theories. And by shining a light on it, it helps to set us free and find the path of healing and hope.

So where does this leave us? If you want proofs that our beliefs are right and others are wrong, I've given you nothing. There are no proofs. And it is awkward and embarrassing to know that we are sometimes seen as on the same page as those who have coopted the name of Christ and mutated his message into something that is not only bizarre but hateful and hostile.

But when I look around the faces I see before me tonight, and I think about the stories of change and growth I have been privileged to witness among you, and about the culture of love and hospitality that I see growing among us, somehow the inability to prove anything doesn't really matter any more. Because if this is all some conspiracy theory, some massive fraud, but it is producing a culture that is more and more life-giving, hope-fuelling, merciful, and radically loving and hospitable, then I still want to be part of it.