

THERE IS A NEW CREATION

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Sunday, April 3, 2022

Jesus loves me, this I know,
for the Bible tells me so;
little ones to him belong,
in his love we shall be strong.

Jesus loves me. Jesus loves you. Does Jesus love everyone?

Some time ago a survey was conducted by a number of Christian denominational journals on religious attitudes. Its findings revealed that despite all the theological diversity we find in the church today both among and within denominations, there is one belief which unites all, namely, that Jesus loves us. Jesus loves us personally and unconditionally, and more than that, Jesus loves people of other faiths too, and even unbelievers, as much as Jesus loves Christians. Jesus loves everyone. That's what people believe.¹ But what does this mean? And does it matter?

It's easy to believe Jesus loves you when you live in one of the most prosperous countries in the world. Despite the economic ups and downs of the past couple of decades, most of us still live better and more comfortably than did royalty of ages past. Indeed, many citizens of our world would gladly exchange their everyday lives for our current times. Our worst times are still better than their best. And so, it's easy for people like us in our circumstances to believe that Jesus loves you, to believe that in his love we are strong.

But what of the rest of the world? What about the uncounted millions, even billions, who are neither prosperous nor Christian? Might this belief in the universal love of Jesus be but a cheap nostrum for our troubled consciences? What cash value does it have if you are languishing in poverty? How does it help

to know that Jesus loves you? Of what benefit is Jesus' love? Where is the strength, the power, we are promised in his love? Might our affirmations simply be a way to avoid our responsibilities?

In a book entitled *The Gospel in Solentiname*, you will find the dialogues of a base community of poor, ordinary Christians in Nicaragua as they discuss what certain Scriptures mean to them. As I read some of these, they seemed to me to be uninspiring, un-insightful and scarcely worthy of publication, until I realized the impact of what they were saying in the light of their context. Talking about the work of Jesus, Francisco said, "Jesus is going to fulfil the work through us; he's not going to do it all by himself. And the work isn't ended."² Amazing! The power of the love of Jesus in the lives of these ordinary, poor, oppressed people actually makes a difference. They really believe that Jesus will fulfil his work through them. And I think that's amazing!

Yet that same religious survey I spoke about earlier seems to indicate that in the lives of prosperous North Americans the love of Jesus has made little difference. No matter what our theological stripe people have little intention of living what the martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called a life of discipleship³, a life of obedience to Jesus. We in this part of the world seem to have no intention of following Jesus' radical ethic and doing such outrageous acts of faith as selling all we have and giving it to the poor.⁴ It scarcely crosses our minds that Jesus might want to fulfil his work through us. Yet in spite of our reluctance, even our refusal, to obey Jesus we continue to believe in our hearts that Jesus loves us. What love could be more unconditional than that?

Interestingly, though, in the same survey there was a second, although not quite so unanimous affirmation, namely, that "People who do not believe in Jesus will not get to heaven." Despite the universal and unconditional love of Jesus those who do not believe in him will not go to heaven. That's what the people in that survey say they believed. And so, it seems then that Jesus' universal love, which we say we believe to be personal and unconditional, offers little real benefit to prosperous North Americans, either in this world or the next, and little challenge.⁵ The sentimentalizing of Jesus' love has made it irrelevant.

Paul, however, offers us a new vision, a new understanding

of what God's love in Christ was about, what it accomplished, what it means as good news: there is a new creation. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new act of creation: all old things have gone; behold, new things have come into being."⁶ There is a new creation.

What a powerful vision this is! What God has done in Christ is not sentimental and cute; it is sensational and cosmic. Yes, God's love in Christ is universal, but not as personal microcosm, rather as the cosmos, the universe. This is no limited individualistic vision, "I'm OK; you're not OK." It is a vision of cosmic newness. Not only has the old passed away, the new has come, not as an act of renovation, but as an act of creation. There is a new creation.

Today's reading from Second Corinthians is actually from last week, the fourth Sunday of Lent. Traditionally, Lent 4 has been a Sunday of refreshment and rejoicing, a break from the sometimes depressing Lenten litany of confession and sin. The readings and themes for the rest of Lent tend to focus on negativity, on sin and confession, on the road to Calvary and the crucifixion. It leaves us in what one author has called a twilight of impotent penitence. We are trying to leave the old behind, what T. S. Eliot calls the "usual reign", but just as this "usual reign" has been robbed of its power, the power of the future kingdom seems so remote. And so our penitence leaves us impotent.

The passage we heard today breaks the mood. It reminds us that we are on the other side of the cross, the other side of the death of God's chosen One, the other side of the old order, the usual reign. We are in a new order under a new sovereign. The old has no claim on us any longer. We are set free, set free from the bonds of self-focus, self-concern, self-centredness; set free from living for ourselves in order to live for others.

This is, once again, not individualistic. It is not just the hope of heaven after death. It is not just a good feeling, or even a thrilling vibration of the soul. This is a new creation, a healing of earth and a healing of human community. As Catholic theologian Hans Küng once said, the commonwealth of God is God's creation healed. Perhaps since the consummation is not yet here, it might be better to speak about God's creation

healing. Nonetheless, what we are speaking about here is more than wistful and wishful thinking. It is more than optimism. Optimism, Christopher Lasch says, is simply the conviction that the future will be better than the past, whereas hope is the “deep-seated trust in life” of those who are prepared for the worst but always expecting that justice will still be done.⁷ It is, however, even more than hope.

Julian of Norwich once affirmed, “The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything.” Although the consummation of the kingdom is not yet, it is already here. The new order is established. The old order, Jesus said from the cross, it is finished. Behold, God is in everything and there is great joy for there is a new creation.

Listen to Paul's claim once more, “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”⁸ Paul does not say that we are to know about the righteousness of God, nor to believe in the righteousness of God, nor even to receive the righteousness of God. Rather we are to become the righteousness of God, healers of creation and human community, ambassadors of reconciliation embodying God's love in what we are and what we do.

Jackie Pullinger is a British Protestant missionary who began to work in Hong Kong in 1966. She originally went to Hong Kong as a musician and a teacher of children. Because the Chinese valued education she was allowed access to the criminal-invested back alleys of what is called the Walled City of Kowloon within Hong Kong. That is where she first came into contact with the drug addicts. She was moved by their suffering and bondage and so as a Christian she wanted to help them. Her approach was to go up to them and speak to them saying, Jesus loves you. Jesus loves you. The responses she received were of two kinds, Who's Jesus? and Who cares? They didn't know Jesus and so she said, “I had to become Jesus to them.” She had to become an ambassador of reconciliation. She had to become God's righteousness. She had to become Christ for them.

As she worked, she came under the protection of the gang lord who sent guards to watch over her. As they watched they saw in her Christ at work and each in turn was converted. The gang leader had tried to get many of his people off drugs through

the use of force. It didn't work. They returned. She used the heart and it worked. And after 14 years the gang leader himself became a Christian.

Since those early days, 1,000's of drug addicts in Hong Kong have been cured of their addiction by her simple treatment: charismatic prayer, individual support from a former addict, community life and after the treatment, service and outreach to other addicts. Jackie Pullinger formed the St. Stephen's Society of former addicts, one of whom took her work to Macao.

What is the new order? What is the new creation? C. K. Barrett writing on this passage says that "to know [your] environment in a new way, and to be newly related to God..., is to live in a new world; a new set of relationships come into being."⁹

What we see happening in Hong Kong with the drug addicts is whole life change, transformation. Behold, there is a new creation. Jackie Pullinger became the righteousness of God, and so have those who have been touched by the creative powers of God's new order through her. And so, they view their world and the people in it through different eyes. The low life of the earth become the children of God. And by relating to others as Christ would their relationship with God is transformed. "History," theologian Walter Wink writes, "belongs to the intercessors who believe the future into being."¹⁰

Behold, there is a new creation. This is God's divine peace initiative and we as ambassadors, citizens of the commonwealth of God, the colony of heaven¹¹, are to seek the ways of peace. We are to seek alternatives to the ways of Cain who refused to be reconciled with his brother.¹²

Last week, the gospel lesson I used was the parable of the prodigal son.¹³ The parable was spoken to answer the disgruntled critics of Jesus who grumbled because he ate with sinners.¹⁴ The climax of the story then is the appeal to the disgruntled elder brother to put aside his resentment, to be reconciled with his brother, and I think with his father, and to join in the feasting and celebration.

"Don't accept the grace in vain," Paul says.¹⁵ Join in the feasting and the celebration. Spread the Good News as the

ambassadors of reconciliation. Through the grace of God become the righteousness of God. "Behold, now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation."¹⁶ There is a new creation. Thanks be to God!

So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

- 1.Ronald Goetz, "Jesus Loves Everybody," *The Christian Century* (March 11, 1992), pg. 274.
2. Ernesto Cardenal ,*The Gospel in Solentiname*, (Jesus and the Samaritan Woman, John 4: 1-42), p. 48.
- 3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Mcmillan Publishing Co. Ltd., New York, 1963. (Originally translated in 1949 by R. H. Fuller from the German text of 1937)
- 4.Matthew 19: 1630.
- 5.*Ibid.*, pg. 275.
- 6.2 Corinthians 5: 17. Translation by C. K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (1973), pg. 174.
- 7.Richard Wightman Fox, "Lasching Liberalism," *The Christian Century* (March 11, 1992), p. 277.
- 8.2 Corinthians 5: 21.
- 9.C. K. Barrett, *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- 10.Quoted in Robert Raines, "Finding Nourishment and Encouragement," *The Christian Century* (March 4, 1992), p. 237.
- 11.Philippians 3: 20. See Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, Abingdon, 1989.
- 12 Genesis 4: 1-16.
- 13 Luke 15: 11b-32.
- 14 Luke 15: 1-3.
- 15 2 Corinthians 6: 1.
- 16 2 Corinthians 6:2.