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Chris Monaghan

Biblical Resources For Renewal

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The Australian Royal Commission (2013-2017) into Institutional responses to child sexual abuse has prophetically forced many of our institutions to confront some painful and shocking truths about how our praxis has fallen so dismally short of the values we profess. As an initial stage of the University of Divinity response a three day conference was convened bringing together victims, church leaders, academics, therapists that issued a call for reform: “For the Christian Churches, we are at a Tipping Point. Recovery will depend on engaging in a thorough going reformation of theology, structures, governance, leadership and culture.”¹

Walter Brueggemann² wrote about the task of re-speaking God in a postmodern world. In our present Australian post Royal Commission context one of the tasks before us is re-speaking God when people have every justification to be wary of our ecclesial communities and our ability and commitment to change. As Brueggemann would put it the task before us is “to provide the pieces, materials and resources out of which a new world can be imagined. Our responsibility, then, is not a grand scheme or a coherent system, but the voicing of a lot of little pieces out of which people can put life together in fresh configurations.”³ In the light of these remarks this paper will take some tentative and initial steps in highlighting some of the pieces and resources that the early church, and the Matthean community in particular, can offer in order that we rebuild our house on rock rather than sand.

THE FUNDAMENTAL CALL OF THE GOSPEL – TO BE IN RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

Jesus’ first words in the Gospel of Matthew speak of the need to be in right relationship (Matt 3:15) and this sounds for the first time a theme that will resound throughout the narrative. The beatitudes

1 http://vox.divinity.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Vox8_11_2018-WEB-basic.pdf (accessed 7 February 2019), 8.

2 Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993)

3 *Ibid.*, 20.

Chris Monaghan, CP, is President of Yarra Theological Union, a College of the University of Divinity. Address: P.O. Box 79, Box Hill, Vic. 3128, Australia. Email: president@ytu.edu.au

make it clear that hungering to create and sustain right relationships is at the heart of Jesus' message (Matt 5:6) and the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matt 25 that concludes Jesus' teaching is concerned with seeing and responding to Jesus' presence among us, especially in those that are vulnerable. Being in right relationship in the community of disciples must exceed what is demanded of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt 5:20). Matthew 23:13-33 excoriates the scribes and Pharisees for the ways in which they have lost sight of what is most important – where recognition, protection of power and privilege have loomed all too large in their motivations, values, actions and structures. While both Jesus and the Matthean community late in the first century had their points of difference and dispute with their co-religionists it is difficult to imagine that Matt 23 was intended only to provide a series of challenges for those outside the community. As Matt 23:3 makes clear, it was not the teaching of the Pharisees that provided the difficulty, but their praxis. It is the attitudes and praxis of Matthew's own community that is at stake. It was Matthew's own community, and subsequent generations of Christians like ourselves who are called to pay attention to the weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy and faith (Matt 23:23). These words surely give us foundation stones upon which to rebuild our ecclesial communities and practice.

THE ABUSE OF POWER

If the Royal Commission has highlighted anything it has been the abuse of power that lies at the heart of our churches flawed response to sexual abuse. Clericalism, the abuse of power, lack of compassion, not protecting the vulnerable or listening to their impassioned calls for justice, all sadly reflect institutions that have forgotten what should have been remembered.

“In several of the religious institutions we examined, the central factor, underpinning and linked to all other factors, was the status of people in religious ministry. We repeatedly heard that the status of people in religious ministry, described in some contexts as ‘clericalism’, contributed to the occurrence of child sexual abuse in religious institutions and to inadequate institutional responses.”

“Clericalism is linked to a sense of entitlement, superiority and exclusion, and abuse of power.”⁴

Within a societal context in which honour and shame were so deeply embedded it is instructive to see how consistently early

4 https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_preface_and_executive_summary.pdf (accessed 7 February 2019), 55, 68.

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Christian communities challenged themselves to deconstruct that paradigm and redirect the quest for power and honour in life-giving and safeguarding ways. Jesus' life of service and self-giving exemplified in his shameful and humiliating death, led to the development of a new paradigm within the Pauline communities that Michael Gorman has entitled "Cruciformity".⁵ It is a paradigm that finds its voice in the early Christian hymn of Phil 2:6-11 that calls us to have the same mind as Christ. Mark crystallises this paradigm in narrative form in the Way of the Son of Man (Mark 8:22-10:52). The argument among the disciples about who is the greatest in Mark 9:33 is accompanied by the counter challenge to become the last of all and the servant of all (Mark 9:35). There is no room within the community for those who lord it over others (Mark 10:42), and the seriously misguided request by James and John to sit at Jesus' right and left in the kingdom is countered by the call to become the slave of all (Mark 10:43). This self-giving service of the Son of Man provides the benchmark by which disciples will be judged (Mark 10:45).

The benchmark set by Mark is developed by Matthew by a number of means. From the beginning of the Gospel Jesus is identified as Messiah, a clearly royal title replete with resonances, expectations and associations about power (Matt 1:1). Having been identified as Son of God in his baptism (Matt 3:17) Jesus is immediately tested in Matt 4:1-11 in terms of how that power and authority will be exercised. Rather than feed himself and let his personal hunger determine his actions (Matt 4:3-4), it will be his mission to nourish others and involve his disciples in that same ministry. This is exemplified in the two feeding narratives (Matt 14:13-21; 15:32-39), and in the last supper of Matt 26:26-29 where it is his own body that is given, and his blood poured out for a new covenant. Offered all the kingdoms of the world in Matt 4:8-10 his response is a perpetual reminder to us of the imperative to serve.

The Markan tradition had already highlighted the role of the Son of Man to be one of service and giving his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Matthew develops this theme by interpreting Jesus' ministry and identity through the filter of the Isaianic figure of the Suffering Servant. Jesus' ministry of healing and the exorcising of demons fulfils the prophecy of the servant taking/receiving our infirmities and carrying our diseases (Matt 8:17 cf. Isa 53:4). In the midst of growing opposition from the Pharisees to Jesus and his message, Matt 12:17-21 draws on Isa 42: 1-12 to proclaim not only the proclamation of justice to the nations, but also a humble ministry that is bringing justice and right relationships to victory.

5 Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001)

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NOT SILENCING VOICES FROM THE MARGINS ...

“Within religious institutions there was often an inability to conceive that a person in religious ministry was capable of sexually abusing a child. This resulted in a failure by adults to listen to children who tried to disclose sexual abuse, a reluctance by religious leaders to take action when faced with allegations against people in religious ministry, and a willingness of religious leaders to accept denials from alleged perpetrators.”⁶

In Matt 15:23 the disciples request that Jesus silence the cries of the Canaanite woman by sending her away, but her persistent faith is rewarded and her daughter healed. As Brueggemann observes reflecting on this text in *Interrupting Silence*; “Good things happen when silence is broken. Our tradition in faith is a long history of inconvenient interruptions.”⁷

There are those who are privileged who wish to silence the uncomfortable and challenging voices and who prefer the status quo, but this is not of the Gospel, and as inconvenient and as painful as it may be for our churches the Royal Commission is calling us to listen and ensure that those whose voices have been silenced have the opportunity to be heard, as confronting as it may be. As Catherine of Siena observed so trenchantly: “I see that the world is rotten because of silence.” The Royal Commissioned has listened, and has rightly demanded that so should we.

THE CHALLENGE OF DEALING WITH DEVIANCE

The early Christian communities were well aware of the reality of sin and deviance among them (see 1 Cor 5). The Pauline communities some decades before had to address the reality of sin among the saints. They had learned the hard lesson that baptism alone does not provide a cure-all for our capacity to make choices that are harmful for ourselves, or others.

The Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5-7 puts before the community the responsibility of cutting off that which causes one to sin and Matthew 18 is a chapter that faces the challenge posed by deviance head-on, highlighting the responsibilities of religious leaders within the community to ensure that no little ones have reason to lose faith. Matt 18:6-9 returns to that theme sounded in the Sermon on the Mount calling the community of disciples to cast out those that cause little ones to sin or be offended. At

6 https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_preface_and_executive_summary.pdf (accessed 7 February 2019), 55.

7 Walter Brueggemann, *Interrupting Silence: God's Command to Speak Out* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 55.

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times ecclesial leadership has focused too much on the call to go after the sheep that has gone astray (Matt 18:12) without paying sufficient attention to the repeated calls that precede it to attend to deviance that destroys the fabric of the community. Like ourselves the Matthean community was mindful of Jesus' call to limitless forgiveness expressed in Matt 18:21-22, but this is *counterbalanced* by the process of fraternal correction outlined in Matt 18:15-17 – a transparent process that cares for the individual who has sinned, but one that gradually escalates the consequences for the individual and the community. A case can be made that too often we have tried to deal with matters “in house” with disastrous consequences for victims, perpetrators, and the wider community.

“Our case studies demonstrated that it was a common practice of religious institutions to adopt ‘in-house’ responses when dealing with allegations of child sexual abuse. Sometimes they did not respond at all. Often, alleged perpetrators were treated with considerable leniency. In-house responses ensured that allegations remained secret, and shielded religious institutions from public scrutiny or accountability.”⁸

REDRESS

“Processes for receiving and responding to complaints and claims for redress were often overly legalistic, lacked transparency, involved generic apologies or no apologies at all, and failed to appropriately recognise the long-term and devastating impacts of child sexual abuse on victims, survivors and their families.”⁹

Matthew's Gospel has something to contribute to our reflection in this regard. Unlike Mark 11:25, where the person offended is the reader, in Matthew 5:23-24 the focus is radically reversed and it is the reader who has wronged another who is challenged to actively seek reconciliation with the one who has been harmed *before* coming to worship. This is a timely reminder that until we have healed the wounds our churches have caused our alleluias will ring hollow and we will be seen by the world as no more than, to use Paul's words, noisy gongs and clashing cymbals (1 Cor 13:1). It is significant that the words of Hosea 6:6 “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” are twice proclaimed by Jesus in Matt 9:13 and in Matt 12:7. In our present post-commission context it is a reminder that worship that is not grounded in authentic and healing praxis will

8 https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_preface_and_executive_summary.pdf (accessed 7 February 2019), 53

9 https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_preface_and_executive_summary.pdf (accessed 7 February 2019), 54.

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be a house built on sand rather than rock (Matt 7: 24-25). It is not enough to cry out “Lord, Lord” (Matt 7:21). The foolish bridal attendants also cry out “Lord, Lord” (Matt 25:11) but their lack of understanding of what was needed to fulfill the task allotted to them is compounded by the fact that they have fallen asleep. The opportunity has passed, the door is closed, and they are shut out. This parable has particular relevance in our present context as we ensure that our systems, processes and theological education will be all that we need them to be.

CONCLUSION

Matthew’s Gospel provides a timely reminder that the foundation stone for rebuilding is that of being in right relationship. This is the orientation that must inform, nourish and challenge our structures, praxis and ministry at every level. In the light of Jesus’ own self-understanding and mission ministry must be conceived and practiced in terms of service and care for the dignity of the other – it was ever thus. From the moment of Jesus’ initial call of the disciples the ecclesial community has been challenged to recognise its failure and the ever-present temptation to deviate from the model of Christ and fall prey to the lure of power. Any ecclesiology that avoids this painful truth will not have the capacity to address the challenges of the present moment in the life of the churches.

Easter Light. On Easter night, the night of the new creation, the Church presents the mystery of light using the Paschal Candle. This is a light that lives by giving of itself. The candle shines inasmuch as it is burnt up. It gives light, inasmuch as it gives itself. The liturgy tells us here that in the paschal mystery it is Christ who gives himself to bestow the great light. Here too the mystery of Christ is made visible. Christ, the light, is fire and flame, burning up evil and so reshaping both the world and ourselves.

- eds LUKE MACNAMARA, OSB AND MARTIN BROWNE, OSB, *The Glenstal Companion to the Easter Vigil*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications) p. 24.