

Redeeming Redemption



It's an interesting time for progressive Christianity. Recently, I've been tracking a thread that was started in Australia by a hymn that was posted. Some found the language too traditional. Some found it actually offensive. Overall, it was a respectful conversation.

It was also a useful thread in the way it revealed the state of the nation when it comes to progressive Christianity. I have to admit that I was surprised by the number of these good folks who were ready to give up on the central metaphors, symbols, and narratives of their lineage. Quite a few were reading to give up on the scriptures. Even Jesus wasn't safe.

I'm no defender of worn out creeds and dogmas. In fact, I don't feel like an apologist for the defence of Christianity at all.

But I'm baffled. Sometimes I feel like I must be missing something. It seems as though many of my colleagues do exactly what a few militant atheists do with religion. That is, toss it. It's all pre-modern myth and superstition, and we perpetuate it by using the same words that our ancestors used—even as we're doing mental gymnastics in our own minds to make it tolerable. I understand the heave-ho impulse. But the approach that I seem to naturally take involves honouring the tradition, the core symbols, metaphors, and narratives, while realizing that they need to be interpreted through a modern, post-modern, and post-postmodern lens. What I find is that there is still plenty of wisdom buried there, but it requires a different set of tools to get at.

Many of my colleagues and friends just don't think that it's worth the effort. Maybe they are right. On the other hand, when you strip a religion of its core metaphors and doctrines, what you are left with is secular humanism. In my opinion, it's not progress. It's modernism. Nothing wrong with secular humanism or modernism—at all. But let's not pretend it's an update of Christianity. It's the end of Christianity.

Take the metaphor of redemption. I suspect that any hymn that referred to Christ as “redeemer” would be a non-starter for most of my friends. I doubt that the word has been uttered inside a liberal congregation for many decades now. Yet when my secular friends go to a film they use the language openly. “There was nothing “redemptive” in the ending, or they are relieved (typically) to find an element of redemption. Because liberal Christians reject any association of redemption with the “atoning” death of Christ, we've stopped using it altogether. But when I read the gospels I interpret what Jesus was doing as obviously redemptive.

Etymologically, the word is a conjunction of re(d)-, an extremely common Latin prefix meaning “again” or “back to the original place” and emere. Emere is a Latin verb meaning “to buy,” itself consisting of the prefix e(x)-, meaning “out of,” and merere, “to deserve” (cf. English “merit”). In the context of the gospel story, the human condition has been hijacked by foolishness. Ignorance of our true nature leads to violence and an unconscious perpetuation of language, social systems, and modes of community life that perpetuate the trauma of inhumanity. Jesus is portrayed as one who lived with wisdom, one in whom others experienced the full dignity of the human condition. He takes the whole traumatic history of our forgetfulness into his own body/mind/heart. With his life and death, he “buys back”/redeems the lost divinity or the image of G_d in the human species.

The problem is that in the traditional interpretation of redemption he did it *for* us. We're off the hook. Been taken

care of, thank you very much. All we need to do is believe it and be saved. Except it obviously hasn't been all tidied up and believing something doesn't make it so. We're at an stage of history now when we can take all that was written about Jesus of Nazareth, as the exclusive bearer of "salvation", and realize that it's now on us. It requires each person and each community to be involved co-redemptively in allowing ourselves to unflinchingly see and feel the trauma of history, and choose, not capitulation, not collusion, not denial, but rather the path that Jesus exemplified in his willingness to suffer that trauma. . We have evolved sufficiently to internalize the story of Jesus, and become ourselves redeemers of the world. Yup, it's terrifying, and not many of us are willing to truly "take up the cross". But that's what we're being called to do.

This work of redemption is primarily past-focused—on liberating the human condition from the trauma of the past, both personal and collective. Personal healing of family trauma is redemptive work. The current truth and reconciliation which is happening right now with our indigenous communities in Canada is an example of redemptive work on a collective level.

But to be "in Christ" is to also be involved in the emergence of a new future that is not determined wholly by the violence and indignities of the past. This future realization (ever-present in our most courageous gestures and ways of relating to self, neighbour, Earth, and Spirit) Jesus called the Kin(g)dom of G_d. The problem is that too many of us who feel this creative urge want to build a brand new future without ever dealing with the past trauma. But there really aren't any short cuts to heaven. As Bruce Cockburn put it "Let's have a laugh for the men of the world who thought they could make things work. Tried to build a new Jerusalem, and end up with New York...ha, ha, ha..." The future is built upon a redeemed past, or at least a past that is always in the process of

being redeemed. To follow in the way of Jesus is to be willing to take this redemptive and creative Okay, I admit, redemption is relatively easy. My next post is going to try to “redeem” the “wrath of G_d”.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB5ChrBhpN4>