

Advancing Nonviolence Session 4: Nonviolence and the Christian Bible

p.114 (from 'Nonviolence and the Christian Bible') to p.138 ("War brings on war! Violence brings on violence!"), and p.141 (from 'Jesus and a Culture of Nonviolent Service') to p.147 ('Finally, he shows us how to live a life of nonviolence to the full and to the end').

Overview of Session

- Time to reflect on journey so far
 - Group discussion on select biblical texts
 - Look at arguments from text on nonviolence within the Christian bible: What does this tell us about God? About Jesus? About Christianity? How does this relate to the Hebrew Scriptures?
 - Group discussion
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Reflections

- Anything that was struck you about nonviolence/violence since our last meeting? Any new insights/reflections you would like to share?
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Context:

- Hugely violent and unstable time that Jesus is born into
- Judea at the time, ruled, tyrannically, by Herod I. Period of increased Romanization – though Herod Jewish King, import Roman customs e.g. imperial eagle place at Temple gate – policies proved unpopular, seen as idolatrous, and meant increased tax burden on Jewish population to fund Herod's lavish life-style/building projects/and Roman wars of expansion.
- 4AD Herod died and tensions boiled over – violence and riots took place in many cities, and brutally suppressed – including in Galilee where revolt suppressed by army of Roman general Varus.
- Herod Antipas, ruled over Galilee and Herod mentioned mostly throughout the Christian scriptures – linked to executions of both John the Baptist and Jesus.
- Continued discontent in this area e.g. revolt of Judas of Galilee in 6AD protesting census for Roman taxes
- Protest against rule of Pontius Pilate in province of Judea (26-36/37AD) – e.g. promoting imperial cult/placing images of Caesar in Jerusalem etc.
- In this context – threats to Empire from Jewish nationalism - see why Jesus would have been seen as such a threat. But also helpful in understanding context in which authors of NT were writing.

- Continued period of unrest/uprising against Roman rule. By 66AD tensions escalated hugely – open revolt leading to First Jewish-Roman War (66-74CE) – huge massacre by Rome and destruction of Second Temple.
 - Further revolts/ massacres – Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-136AD) – crushed by Rome, Emperor Hadrian – many sold into slavery, transported, Judea depopulated, land confiscated etc.
 - Time NT written then, one of great turmoil – both political and theological. (45AD-150AD ish...)
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Advancing NV: Christian Bible

- Like Hebrew Scriptures, violence is not hidden within the Christian Scriptures – see this in the beginnings of the Gospel of Matthew – 2:16-18 Massacre of the Innocents (Herod I, orders execution of all male children under two in area of Bethlehem)
- ‘The context of Jesus’s life and teaching was a clash therefore between not only a great empire and a small colony, but between two fundamentally different visions for the ultimate destiny of the human race, two diametrically opposed approaches for establishing peace on earth’ – p.116.
- Growing academic theological/scriptural consensus that Jesus lived and preached NV (p.114)

Jesus’ NV Teaching

Jesus and Hebrew Scripture

p.118 Argue Jesus drawing on understandings of Hebrew Scriptures/God as nonviolent/development of understanding of God and violence. Doesn’t draw on texts that approve of/inspire violence – rather relies on prophets.

p.119 Embrace of idea of suffering servant (Isiah) – another way to deal with violence – God as nonviolent/willing to suffer instead of using violence

p.124 Building on minimization of violence, to active nonviolence e.g. ‘an eye for an eye’ as minimization = ‘turn the other cheek’.

Theological: Love your enemies: To acknowledge God as creator of all – loves all/made in image and likeness of God – human dignity. Therefore, includes everyone – personal AND political enemies (Good Samaritan). See in example of Jesus healing servant of Roman centurion. Moves beyond pacifism i.e. refusing harm, but actively reaches out to the other, through love in action.

Tactical: Sermon on the Mount -guide to enact practices of nonviolence – asking disciples to follow this way of life.

Teaching nonviolent direct action e.g. “Turn the other cheek” as act of defiance, asserting dignity, asking harmer to rethink.

Parables ‘a rhetoric of nonviolent challenge’ (p.115). Encounter; reconciliation; communion; dialogue etc.

Questions

Part 1: Have a quick read over the parable of the Good Samaritan. What does it reveal about a) the teachings of Jesus and b) the person of Jesus? How might this relate to nonviolence?

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.^[i] ‘Teacher,’ he said, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ²⁶He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What do you read there?’ ²⁷He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.’ ²⁸And he said to him, ‘You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.’

²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbour?’ ³⁰Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii,^[k] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, “Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.” ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ ³⁷He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

How do you understand Jesus’ teachings on NV? How do these relate to the Hebrew Scriptures?

Jesus’ NV Practice

Context

Learning from examples of nonviolent direct action at the time e.g. 4 AD Judas and Matthias removing golden eagle from Temple gate/26 AD protests against Pilate bringing images of Caesar into Jerusalem on army's standards - lie on ground and refuse to move (p.127).

Resistance

To structural/cultural violence - both towards empire and religion etc.

Religion e.g. Mark 3:1-6 healing on Sabbath - work of mercy/compassion (either as showing above law, or consistent with Sabbath as day to celebrate release from bondage etc.) Defying inclusion/exclusion laws surrounding purity - touching leper/bleeding woman etc. allowing all to 'rejoin community of faith' p.130.

Empire e.g. the Messiah entering on a donkey (solidarity with poor)- direct opposition to Pilate entering Jerusalem on a war horse.

Refusal to respond - when handed to high priests/Pilate/up until crucifixion - ultimate symbol of commitment to NV up until death.

Reconciliation

After harm has occurred - restorative, rather than retributive, justice. Focusing on the victim, aiming to repair harm, then escalate if necessary (Mark 18:15-17). Community engagement to reintegrate the offender e.g. reaching out to tax collectors/sinners.

Emphasising and practising forgiveness - a gift from God, and then a task to emulate this. Forgiveness as breaking cycle of revenge. See on the Cross: 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do'.

Defence

Walking into sites of violence to protect e.g. John 8:4-5 mob about to stone a woman for adultery - interrupts "The one among you without sin, cast the first stone".

Service and Community

Responding to Empire by forming 'counter-community' built on 'nonviolence and service' p.142.

Showing a new way, a new logic of the Kingdom of God e.g. emphasising the least powerful figures (children/women etc.)

Calling disciples to build such a community, guided by beatitudes. Example of service – washing disciples feet - ‘Love one another as I have loved you’.

Breaking of bread and wine – calling to continue to act as Jesus did.

Garden of Gethsemane continues to model this: Showing friendship and love to his betrayer, Judas. Healing ear of servant of high priest. Tells disciples to ‘put away the sword’ – the last words to them before Crucifixion.

Questions

Part 2: How do you understand Jesus as practicing NV? Are there other examples you can think of? How does this link to common practices of NV? Pp.132-133 might be helpful here. What might this mean for Christians?

Quotations

‘Rome’s imperial power was military, economic and political, but also religious, theological and even eschatological. The Romanisation of Israel involved a clash between empire and colony, but also more profoundly between the Kingdom of Rome with its vision of civilization, and the Kingdom of God as the divine vision of creation’ – p.115.

Jesus: 1) ‘...confront[s] the human tendency to regard those who are different from us as allogenes, outcasts, and enemies, removing one of the main triggers of violence from people’s minds. This is preventative peacemaking...’

2) ‘...teach his disciples how to cut the ground from under the tendency to respond to violence with violence... meeting it with creative nonviolence. This is intervention peacemaking: interrupt the cycle of revenge and violence before it can really get going’.

3) ‘uses nonviolent direct action to address and change the underlying causes of violence. He knows that a peacemaker sometimes has to be first a peace disturber.... This is civil resistance peacemaking: addressing the structures of violence embedded in a society...’

4) uses 'a nonviolent approach to bringing about reconciliation and healing after the harm has been done... This is reconciling peacemaking' pp.132-133.

5) 'shows how to neutralize personal violence and protect others with the power of creative nonviolent action'.

6) 'calls us to form a culture and community of nonviolence service'

7) 'shows us how to live a life of nonviolence to the full and to the end' p.147.

'Jesus going to the cross is the final action of one who throughout his life acted nonviolently to remove the causes of suffering for his people and stand in resistance to the powers. Jesus constantly risked the hatred, fear and violence of the powers in charge but kept right on going. The cross is the direct result of his ethic of nonviolence resistance and action' p.145.