

The Passion as Good News for those on the margins

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(NOTE: Passionists take a 4th vow to ‘to keep alive the memory of the Passion’. This is the meaning of ‘memoria passionis’)

Recent writings about Religious Life have reminded me (not that I should need to be), that the first ‘rule of life’ always and everywhere, for everyone, is the Gospel. Every practice, rule, principle, theory, idea, question, has to be measured against the Gospel.

And we read in the Gospels that when John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus to ask “Are you the Messiah?” Jesus answered “Tell him what you see and hear – the deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor”. I am assuming, by the way, that the truth of the Gospel being Good News for the poor and those on the margins, implies a priority for the poor – a preference or preferential option for the poor.

The Gospel is Good News for the poor. So it’s not a question of saying anything new to persuade anyone here that the Gospel is good news for the poor, those on the margins, those on what Pope Francis has called ‘the existential peripheries’. That is assumed. Or at least, that it is supposed to be so and therefore is if we live it and witness to the true Gospel. I will say incidentally that although the phrases ‘the poor’ and ‘those on the margins’ are not identical, they overlap and connect to such a degree that I am going to use them almost as synonyms, but not quite.

In case we need reassurance of the truth that the Gospel is good news for those on the margins and poor, I would simply remind us all that God in Jesus chose to be born and grow up in a tiny village (Nazareth at any rate gets no mention in any other historical records) on the northern margins of a small country on the margins of the Roman Empire. I can list a number of episodes from the Gospels: Jesus calling the rich young man (and by implication so many others) to sell their possessions and give everything to the poor: the parable of the rich man who went to hades, and the poor man Lazarus to ‘the bosom of Abraham’: the beatitudes of ‘blessed are the poor’ or ‘poor in spirit’ – at any rate the anawim: blessed are those who mourn: blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice: blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of justice. Not forgetting such words from elsewhere in the New Testament such as in the book of James: “the labourers wages that were kept back are crying out - the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts”. And when St Paul says to “treat such people as you would tax collectors and sinners”, we can only remember how Jesus chose to go among just those people to offer them God’s mercy and love, as he spent most of his ministry wandering those marginal Galilean villages. All of which makes clear that Jesus was following in the prophetic tradition that called for justice for the poor. So I think there is plenty of re-assurance for us there if we need it.

So, if the Gospel is ‘good news’ for those on the margins, then the cross and passion must be too, and by definition a true ‘memoria passionis’ also. But that does raise the question, what is a ‘true memoria passionis’? In two senses – that is both is accurate in expressing the meaning of the cross and passion,

and also effective in bringing it to life for people today, especially those in the margins. 'Bringing to life' because of the meaning of 'memoria' – not just memory, but memoria in the Eucharistic sense of making it present in our lives, or making us present to the event itself, a living truth, not just a remembered but dead fact.

So, how is the passion to be brought to life, both accurately and in a way which transforms people such that it is 'good news for those on the margins'

AUTHENTICITY

I lived here at Minsteracres during my Novitiate. And some of us went to hear John Pridmore speak. He had written a book called 'From Gangland to Promised Land', and he spoke about his life as a bouncer and gang member in east London, and the conversion experience that led him to return to the Church and to want to travel the country speaking to young people especially, to show them a different way, and to show the power of God still alive in our world today, in his life, and the difference that can make. It was a powerful to hear him speak. In the course of his talk, he spoke about the place of the cross in life, how certain things can be real crucifixions, and also resurrections. And I thought to myself, he is doing the kind of thing that Passionists used to do, travelling the country preaching the power of Passion, Cross and Resurrection in our lives.

Which prompted the question: Why are we not doing that? I have two inter-related answers to that question: One is, because on the whole we are not being invited to speak, certainly in the way we used to be. And if we were being invited, on the whole those inviting us would not get much interest, not many would listen, and it would have little impact on their lives. Or to put that another way, what we have to say would not have the impact John Pridmore did.

And the second part of the answer, is that the key difference between what he had to say and what Passionists often used to do, is that what he was saying came from a very powerful personal experience. He did not need to sit in the dark and meditate for hours to think up something to say. It was just his life. It was real, it was authentic. And it is that authenticity that is very much valued by our times, and especially by younger people.

It reminds me of the words of Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, quoted by John Paul II and the Popes since, especially when speaking about the New Evangelisation: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."

John Pridmore is primarily a witness, more than a teacher. He does not have an in depth theological education. But he has his life, and his faith reflection on it, and that speak volumes. So we need to speak about our experience, and to reflect on that. And that is what matters. But it seems to me that, to be able to do that, we need to have what has been called a 'story rich life'. We need a life which is itself is a parable of God's kingdom, or at least one that is full of such parables of the kingdom, and which speaks of God's grace at work in the world of today, in a language and idiom the people of today can understand.

SCAPEGOATS

I do want to say something briefly about what I believe is an important insight into the meaning and power of the cross that entered the world in the 20th Century. That is the work of Rene Girard on scapegoats.

Who do we scapegoat in our society? Some phrases may help to remind us of some examples. “Illegal Immigrants”. “Bogus Asylum seekers”. “Benefit scroungers”. “Islamic extremists”. “feckless youth”. “Idle poor”. “the great unwashed”. All of these indicate groups of people who are stigmatised because of their vulnerability, poverty, or being on the margins of society. It is what is called ‘blaming the victim’, which justifies our attitude towards them and their situation so we do not feel that we should try to do something about their position, because it is their own fault. My way of summarising this aspect of Rene Girard’s insights is to say that in the cross and passion of Jesus as recorded for us in the Gospels, we see that in fact the victim is innocent. And this is so at least in part because it is seen, certainly from the perspective of faith, that God is on the side of the victim, not on the side of the powerful. In the passion and cross, God is not on the side those who appear to be successful and respected in society, those who run the show, who are at the heart and centre of things political, social, religious, military, financial (for in a Temple State that was a vassal of the Empire of the time, all these powers were held by a very small group of people) . In the passion, God is seen to be on the side of what John Meier has called ‘The Marginal Jew’.

Jesus was found guilty by the institutions and social groups of his day, but history recognises his innocence, and the guilt in fact of those who convicted him. This plants a seed of doubt: never again can we so easily blame the victim for their own plight. Jesus in his cross and passion has exposed and shone a light on the processes, social, psychological ,spiritual etc – that lead us to victimise, exclude, marginalise, oppress - and blame the victim. This ‘innocence of the victim’ –moves us to pay attention to the victims story and the victims truth or truths (that is, the victims perspective), even in fact to give it a priority - in forming our understanding of what is happening and what we should do. As Cardinal Vincent Nichols said recently for example, in dealing with the abuse crisis, we have to give the experience of abuse survivors first place. This priority for the victim, for those who are powerless, is part of what is meant by a ‘preferential option for the poor’. This impetus is in itself as aspect of the way in which the passion and cross – and therefore an accurate memoria passionis – is good news for those on the margins, whose voice is so often ignored. In reminding us of the call to listen to the voice of, and be in solidarity with, the ‘crucified of today’, the victims of today, it tells us something of what a true memoria passionis looks like.

So, to pull together my strands so far: if it is the case that what is needed is an authentic lived witness that brings the Gospel and the memoria passionis to life: and if a key part of the meaning of that cross and passion which memoria passionis is intended to bring to life, is that exposure of ‘the innocence of the victim’: And conversely, if that innocence of the victim also reveals the guilt not only of those who put themselves in the position of judge and persecutor, but also of those who by betrayal or cowardice or collusion contribute to the crucifixion of the innocent – then what? Where does this leave us?

THEN – If we intend to put ourselves in the position of those who would attempt to ‘bring to life the memory of the passion’ in a vital way, by life and deed first, and then by words: THEN – we need to find ways that follow Jesus’s example, which he asked his disciples to do anyway, when he said “take up your cross and follow me”.

SO – how do we do that – find ways to ‘take up the cross and follow our Teacher? No doubt there are many such ways. I believe is that there is one way of acting in particular which has been increasingly popularised in the 20th and 21st Centuries, just not so much among Church going Christians in western Europe. I believe this way is among the signs of our times and the movement of the Spirit. And this way is what I now want to speak about.

GANDHI FILM CLIP

But first, I want to show you a film clip, and then read some Passion – related scripture:

This is a fairly short clip from the film ‘Gandhi’. After that I will read from the text of Isaiah, and reflect on where this takes us. [Film clip of Gandhi burning pass cards in South Africa, being beaten up for it, and then quoting the sermon on the mount as an explanation of non-violence]

ISAIAH: THE SUFFERING SERVANT:

Isaiah 50:4-9 , 52:13 – 53:12

GANDHI AND JESUS

Gandhi was of course the main innovator and inspiration for others in the field of a form of what may be called ‘non-violent resistance’ to oppression in the 20th Century. It has a variety of names, ‘civil disobedience’, ‘non-violence’, ‘non-violent direct action’ (or NVDA), or ‘non-violent resistance’. Again, they are overlapping but not identical terms. I will be referring mainly to ‘non-violent resistance’. His main inspiration for his practice came from three sources. Tolstoy, the Gospels as understood by Tolstoy, and Thoreau. Tolstoy had a profound religious conversion experience, after which he became a convinced Christian pacifist and anarchist. He wrote “The Kingdom of God is Within You”, among other books, to expound his belief, based on a literal reading of the Gospels, particularly of the ‘sermon on the mount’. Gandhi was also influenced by the 19th Century American, Henry David Thoreau, who wrote “On Civil Disobedience”. But his main source of inspiration, as can be seen in the film clip, is his understanding of the ethic of Jesus as revealed in the Gospels. He was impressed by Jesus, but not with Christians. He famously said, “the whole world would be Christian, but Christians are so little like your Christ”.

I hope you can see what I believe are the very strong parallels between the actions of Gandhi as depicted in the film, practising non-violent resistance, and the words of Isaiah in the songs of the suffering servant. It seems to me that Gandhi is, in his non-violent resistance, enfleshing or incarnating those words, very much in the same kind of way that Jesus did in His passion and death. [I am not saying that Gandhi has the same status for our faith as Jesus! I am not saying that Gandhi is God incarnate, as we believe Jesus is.] This naturally implies a very close correlation between Gandhi’s

non-violence and the cross and passion, and therefore between non-violent resistance and the memoria passionis, such that my assertion is that non-violent resistance is in fact a powerful way in which to bring to life the redemptive truths of the passion, and also to reveal and expose the innocence of the victim, so that in practising non-violent resistance, we are entering ourselves into the very dynamic of the redemptive power of the cross, all the more so when we act in the name of God: and in doing so we are very much answering Jesus's call to "take up your cross and follow me". Not in an exclusive way, as if this is the only way to take up the cross, but certainly in a very significant way. Jose Orbegozo wrote when he was Passionist General, something like "what matters is significance not efficiency". [I believe Pope Francis said something similar in *Evangelii Gaudium*.] It is certainly something I believe strongly, and that it is an idea worth reflecting on. Significance of course speaks of meaning, which is so essential a need for a fulfilled life, and interpreting the meaning of our lives is a key dimension of religious faith.

A WORD ABOUT CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

The Church in this country is deeply law abiding and pretty conformist and generally seen and acts largely as part of the Establishment, and many of our leading Catholic churchmen have strived to make it more so. Common Law is deep in our national psyche. And for someone like me at least, who came from a materially comfortable, upwardly mobile, newly educated, suburban aspiring middle class background, (or at least what I call 'Essex class' – which is to say the well off working class) – I grew up bought into all that. All this is a way of saying that publicly breaking the law does not come naturally to many of us.

But it is not something we, especially as Passionists, should avoid in itself. After all, Jesus was arrested, imprisoned, taken to trial, convicted and sentenced. In fact, how it came about and how he dealt with it and how he responded to it, is the whole of the Passion story. Not to mention the arrests, imprisonment and trials that seem to be bread and butter to the first Christians, and St Augustine's words, used also by Thomas Aquinas, that 'an unjust law is no law at all'. We have grown so long used to institutionalised Christianity being the Establishment, running the show in Christendom for centuries. But Christendom is over and we are heading back to the type of context the earliest Christians would have been familiar with. Only we live in 'Rome' – I may come back to that.

NON-VIOLENCE AND NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE

There can sometimes be a confusion between the terms 'non-violence' and 'non-violent resistance'. 'Non-violence' sounds like a mere negative: the avoidance of violence. 'Non-violent resistance' on the other hand, is primarily a form of resistance, a way of resisting perceived evils, injustices, violence, oppression. The other context in which British people of my age and older would have heard the word 'resistance' with a similar meaning would have been regarding the French resistance to the Nazi occupation during WWII. That of course was a violent resistance movement.

Non-violent resistance movements use other means to defend themselves, others and the truth: ultimately, non-violent resistance is about putting faith in the redemptive power of suffering and love, or suffering love, rather than violence. Practising it involves seeing clearly through what Walter Wink, in his book "Engaging the Powers" called "the myth of redemptive violence" which we are sold all

the time, from children's comics and cartoons, through DVD box sets, to Hollywood films and governmental rhetoric about things like 'making the world safe for democracy'.

There is of course an overlap between non-violent resistance and non-violence. To simply be non-violent could be passive. But to resist non-violently is to take responsibility, and to try to break what Dom Helder Camara called 'The Spiral of Violence'. This is why I believe active non-violence to be not just a form of 'memoria passionis', but also in fact an evangelical virtue: In contrast, while violence may not be as such 'unjust' - in the sense that, if you hit me, its not unjust or unfair necessarily for me to hit you - it simply participates in the cycle of sin, in the spiral of violence.

War of course is the major form of institutionalised violence in our world, which goes far beyond a question of 'you hit me so I will hit you'. There is a sense in which however, the 'Just War Theory' has regarded war in a very over-simplified sense - a 'reified' sense where states are effectively justified in hitting back against other states, with no sense that the state is no more a person than a corporation is, and it must use often poor, powerless and marginal people as its proxies and victims.

Anyhow, that is a slight diversion. But the main point is that violence simply continues the spiral of violence, whereas to respond or challenge it with non-violence assertiveness or dignity, is to open the door to a completely different dynamic.

JESUS, NON-VIOLENCE, AND PACIFISM

To advocate non-violence can be seen as simply to advocate pacifism, again simply understood as refusing to use violence and specifically military means to solve conflicts. It is as I have been saying, in fact much more than that. However, this does also point us towards the question of Jesus and pacifism. It is my belief that Jesus was a pacifist, and that this is shown to us above all in the passion.

We are all I hope well aware of the sayings of Jesus, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you", "turn the other cheek", "walk the extra mile", and probably less familiar with "if they take your cloak, give them your tunic also" . There is plenty I can explore about these teachings, but what I want to say is that we can tell Jesus was serious because it was exactly these principles that he practised in the passion and on the cross. He loved His enemies, he prayed for his persecutors, he turned the other cheek. In addition, as Walter Wink and others have said, Jesus was not setting down precise practices to be observed. He was teaching principles, giving examples of ways for powerless people to assert their dignity and disconcert their opponent, putting the oppressor off balance. Again, I would assert, this is exactly what Jesus did when he was on trial. When he was asked questions he didn't answer them, instead he either remained silent or returned question for question, in a way that still disconcerts us today.

It did not save His life of course: At least, not from crucifixion. So you could say that non-violence, pacifism, doesn't work. Jesus should have called in his legions, his armies of angels, after all. And after all, was not Jesus's life the most important single human life in recorded history? Wasn't he the Messiah, the Incarnate Son of the Most High God? Wouldn't this life above all be the most important to save with a last ditch fight of an inspired army, or even a 'legion' of angels?

But he didn't stay dead. Which is what you are supposed to do when the state executes you. In rising again the stone was rolled away and the seal broken: seals were not supposed to be broken, that was the whole point of them. This was yet another act of civil disobedience in the life and ministry of Jesus. And we know that the redemptive power of what did happen rolls down the centuries. So the story of the Gospels is not one of the uselessness of non-violent resistance, but of the power of redemptive suffering, freely undertaken.

NON-VIOLENCE AND PACIFISM AS GOOD NEWS FOR THOSE ON THE MARGINS

You may ask, how are non-violence and pacifism, and specifically the non-violent love of the Cross and therefore of the memoria passionis, good news for those on the margins of society? We are used to a society where violence is not very visible to us. There is structural violence, our governments get involved in wars and invasions in far away countries, but it rarely impinges on us directly. Especially since, in the case of the UK, the peace process in the north of Ireland took hold. But there are a number of ways that this is true: that non-violence, which is for us the non-violent love of the cross, is good news for those on the margins.

Firstly, in the case of wars, it is always the poorest, the weakest, the most vulnerable, who are the most damaged by war: both by direct violence, and by the destruction of productive resources, infrastructure, housing, etc. Also, the arms race, and war and preparations for war 'rob the poor to an intolerable degree' (Gaudium et Spes 81), as resources are diverted from social needs to military expenditure, even when the weapons and military systems are never used in anger, such as in the case of the British 'Trident' nuclear weapons system (So far – and hopefully always!)

Secondly, also in the case of wars, and the use of violence generally, it is by definition the most powerful who win wars, and usually who start them. War and violence is the means by which international robbery is enforced, and the poor nations, those on the margins of the global community, remain trapped in exploitative international relations. When a country steps out of line and tries to assert its freedom from foreign exploitation, it is 'punished' vigorously: witness Iraq in the 90's and in these last years, Nicaragua in the 80's, Czechoslovakia in the 60's, Hungary in the 50's, the Jewish people when they rebelled against Roman domination in the first century of the Christian era: the list could surely go on.

Thirdly, it gives a means to the most powerless to defend themselves, or at least to assert their dignity and freedom. Violence is not a good option: it will likely lead to their destruction, or the destruction of their property (as in riots in areas like Liverpool 8 in the 1980's or Los Angeles, or more recently Ferguson, Missouri, USA.). Violence tends to escalate out of control, and tends to provoke a more violent response. It gives the oppressor the excuse for moving up to that next level of violence, to escalate to a level that the oppressed and powerless can never hope to match. It is called 'escalation dominance'. 'Escalation dominance' is in fact an explicit part of USA military doctrine – always maintain a dominant position by being willing to move up to the next level of violence, ultimately up to the level of nuclear weapons. Non-violence cannot guarantee that will not happen, but it tends to provoke a less aggressive response, to de-escalate, or at least to reveal the presence of structural violence and structural injustice that may otherwise be hidden to a wider public, and also to reveal

who are the true perpetrators. And in the process, it does not cause any destruction in itself, either of people, housing, infrastructure, or property as such.

Fourthly, it reveals the truth of who is the victim, and that the victim is innocent. It changes the direction of travel. It works in as much as it delegitimizes oppression, in specific and in general.

Fifthly, if we are not to destroy ourselves, all of us, we urgently need to grow in the practice of non-violence, and not just those on the margins but everyone, will suffer the effects, whether due to climate change and environmental destruction, or due to the ultimate form of violence, nuclear war, which is still threatened by the world's nuclear powers. As Martin Luther King said so presciently, the choice before us now is not violence or non-violence, but non-violence or non-existence.

Sixthly, in opposition to what many believe, is the growing realisation of the truth that non-violent resistance is actually very powerful. It does not guarantee success, but nor does violence. And non-violence has been used in small and large scale ways to bring greater freedom to oppressed peoples. These include Gandhi's India, the suffragette movement for votes for women, the 1950's and 60's civil rights movement in the USA, apartheid South Africa (the struggle there was mostly although not exclusively non-violent), the Phillipine's in regard to the Marcos government, most of the movements that brought about the end of the Soviet Empire, including Solidarity in Poland, to only cite some of the most well known movements.

There are probably more ways non-violence, which I could call the non-violence of the Cross, is good news for those on the margins, but I think the picture is clear. Active non-violence, like both sin and virtue, is a virus. It is a relatively new phenomenon historically, and thank God it is growing fast. The question is, are we as Christians going to realise how much of this movement is rooted in the Gospel, and start to practice it? And are we, as disciples of Jesus particularly formed to witness to the love of God as revealed in the Passion, going to join ourselves to this movement of the Holy Spirit, and bring to life the memory of the non-violent love of God as revealed in the passion and cross, or at least act in solidarity and support with those who do? Are we here, our communities and our friends, mostly from the wealthiest countries in the world, going to step out of our privileged positions of comfort and security, to put our bodies in the way, take risks, confront the powers and principalities, and enter into solidarity with the least of our world, those on the margins, who are waiting for Christians to be more like Jesus.

To conclude, I would like to show you a slide show of images taken from a variety of non-violent actions I have taken part in with the Catholic Worker movement here in the UK. It is adapted from the one I showed at the Passionist JPIC Conference in Rome, at Ss John and Pauls, earlier this year.

THINGS TO MENTION DURING SLIDE SHOW:

‘SPEAKING WITH THE LANGUAGE OF FAITH’ – non-violent resistance, liturgy and the liturgical cycle

STATIONS OF THE CROSS AROUND THE GEOGRAPHY OF SUFFERING:

Slide show of CW ‘Stations of the Cross of Non-Violent Love’

Slide show used at Passionist JPIC Conference in Rome.

- Aware that these actions are nearly all opposition to war and opposition to war. There are many other issues that need to be confronted, and values asserted: we have also confronted:
 - refugee and migration issues,
 - climate change, homelessness issues,
- Others associated with the CW movement have confronted: the death penalty, abortion providers, other environmental issues, and many more.
- We need to be aware of our position: for myself, as a straight male born in late 20th century London, UK, I need to be aware of my position of privilege: that I was ‘born into the world with an arsenal of weapons, the weapons of privilege’ in a ‘1st world’ country at the heart of the Empire of our times, the global capitalist empire . If I want to be a pacifist, I have to learn to come into the world completely disarmed’. [to paraphrase American folk singer Utah Phillips]
- The implications of this for me, include being willing to ‘cash in’ my privileges in non-violent resistance and on behalf of, and solidarity with, the poor, oppressed and marginalised of this world.

Often called ‘activism’, but can in fact be very contemplative: standing in silence on street corners, sitting in police or prison cells, can give plenty of time for prayer, reflection and study.