

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalms 119:1-8

Matthew 5:21-26

Contempt and the miracle of the saint

In a sentence:

What the contemptuous world needs (now, and always), is deadlock-breaking love.

Some of us have been meeting over the last year to consider *The Quarterly Essay*, as each issue comes out. Last September's issue was an analysis by Scott Stevens and Waleed Aly of the rise of 'contempt' in modern politics. The authors note the intensifying shrillness of 'cancel culture' on the left and corresponding antagonism on the right, and the apparent inability to communicate across those lines other than by verbal grenades lobbed out of ideological trenches. The November issue contained substantial correspondence in reply to Stevens and Aly's arguments, filling out the spectrum of thought about contempt, justice and power in society today.

What has the gospel to say into a culture of contempt?

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times," [Jesus remarks], 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment'. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

This is, by the way, not quite the *gospel* – it is the law – but it would seem to have something to do with our present experience of deep antagonism in society and politics. Jesus' saying comes from the Sermon on the Mount, which both intensifies the received legal tradition of Israel and re-casts it. Here, and in the verses which follow, Jesus presses past a mere external observance of the letter of the law (that internet trolls usually don't actually kill people they hate) to a problem with the spirit (that internet trolls would be happy if someone else killed the people they hate). And this applies, of course, also to those of us who are not internet trolls but still have a capacity for the kind of anger, hatred and contempt for others Jesus indicates here.

Jesus' solution to the problem of contempt would seem – at first blush – simply to be, 'Stop it; don't do that!'. This is fairly straightforward advice, if not easy to implement. The very fact that Jesus says thinking murderous thoughts is the 'same' as murder suggests the likely impossibility of finally obeying this commandment: contempt cannot be expunged.

In Aly and Stevens' analysis of contempt, and in the various responses to their proposal in the next issue, the assumption is quite the opposite. The question asked is, If this is how our society and politics are working, how do we fix them? (And we *must* ask this question, of course!) The question leads into analysis of the nature of democracy and its inherent tensions, and the challenges of balancing rights and responsibilities in human relationships. Not surprisingly, the dualism of the right-responsibility debate means there's no open-shut case which doesn't look like an indefensible prioritising of one over the other, and this is all the more obvious from the responses to the *Essay*. As we might expect, those responses are variously at odds and in agreement with each other and with Stevens and Aly, sometimes quite vigorously and, here and there, with a least a little contempt creeping into the debate about how to moderate contempt in public debate. It's all pretty cacophonous!

The problem here is that everyone is at least a little bit right, which is to say positively what Jesus has said negatively in our short reading this morning – which is that everyone is at least a little bit wrong. What do we do with that intractability, that inability to pull together in the same direction? The usual approach, and that taken by most of the contributors to *The Essay*'s discussion, is *analysis*. A kind of moral calculus is developed from given principles. In this case, background principles include 'democracy' and corresponding notions like 'civility', with concerns about justice and peace being motivating principles: how can we tweak the system to address injustice and unpeace?

One solution – entertained at the edges in this conversation – is revolution. This is not a tweaking but an overthrow of the system, expecting the revolutionary violence to be outweighed by the anticipated justice which follows. History has known this experiment. Another solution, often just as violent, is the strong monarchic political hand which doesn't have to honour democracy but can simply crush the unjust, although it often mistakes the just for the unjust. Because neither of these is an option for contemporary Western societies, attention turns to tweaking: let us better understand ourselves as denizens of democracy, and moderate our behaviour according to a deeper sense of democratic being and, in this way, move towards broader justice and more profound peace.

This is a laudable intention, and we cannot but commit ourselves to such work. Civil and divine law requires this of us. And yet, it will not work. As pessimistic as that is, its justification is pretty much all of history up until a few moments ago. Between the sayings of Jesus and today, there are almost 2000 years. Yet, between *what* he says and what we say *today*, there is but the time we require to take an intervening breath. When everyone is a little bit right, and so a little bit wrong, no social or moral calculus will lead us out of the messiness of life together. This is because the condition of being human is not a problem to be solved; it is a mystery to be negotiated. Mysteries are things which are there and can be seen and touched and experienced but can't be comprehended or managed or directed. If we know that we ought not to hold in contempt, or to lust, or to covet, or to be jealous, we still can't help but be like this sometimes. We might be able to keep it to ourselves, which helps a little, but this doesn't make the possibility of murder or adultery or theft go away.

So, what will help here?

Only a miracle.

This is a problem, of course, because we don't believe in miracles these days – we don't *really* believe in them, as much as we long for such rupturings of what we expect to happen next. Part of the problem is that our sense of what a miracle might be is runs along the lines of turning sticks into snakes, walking on water or fast-tracking sick people back to health. These kinds of things, of course, are part of the biblical story, but they distract us.

The miracle which matters, and the miracle which our society and politics desperately needs, is the appearance of the *saint*. We can scarcely hear even this suggestion without scoffing, not least in the churches if even more loudly in the wider world. But this makes the proposal no less correct. Saints are peace-oriented, justice-creating rule-breakers. They are not 'holy' in the sense that they never think contemptuous, salacious or envious thoughts. But neither is the possibility of acting for a peacing justice limited by those failings. Saints are those who simply choose to 'do justice and love mercy' with all the humility and grace they can muster. And they do this *despite* the circumstances, despite what the system says might be the minimum required or the

maximum allowed. Saints, then, are not necessarily civil or polite or democratic. They are truth-tellers and truth-doers.

If 'saint' is too hard a word to re-habilitate for modern politics, then perhaps 'love' might be admissible. Interestingly, it is the word with which Stevens and Aly conclude their response to their critiques.

'Is it really too much to suggest', they ask, 'that the commitment to see one another as equals, and therefore as equals in a shared project which depends on cooperation, compromise, frankness, remorse, forgiveness, reciprocity and mutual education, requires a devotion for which the only word is love?'

'Love' has the advantage of being a more secular word than 'saint', although with the disadvantage that we often dilute it to almost vacuity. Aly and Stevens propose a strong, politically engaged sense of love, and imagine that we might have to be such lovers. Yet the political crisis they seek to address is that many (at every point of the political compass) seem deaf to the call. And so the call to love is either pointless – in that it doesn't move us along – or it is incomplete: the *imperative* to love also requires the *indicative* of love, which is that such love will die for love's sake. That is, we must see the *cost* of heeding this call to love. Saints – if we persist with this label for such lovers – have a tendency to die for their saintliness. If this death is not a crucifixion or a drive-by shooting, it is at least the 'aspirational' death-to-self which is personal sacrifice for the greater good. And because such love involves some kind of death, it is necessarily irrational: it resists balanced analysis and comprehension.

Contempt can only be overcome by lovers prepared to die at some level, and prepared to die not only for a 'cause' but, ultimately, for the ones who hold them in contempt – for they 'know not what they do'. This is what a moral and political calculation cannot propose, although it's the meaning of Jesus' own death and the death to death to which all potential saints are called.

And who is called to die this life-enabling death to death? This question bedevils the conversation and the responses to the original *Essay*. The answer is, Everyone. Not everyone will heed the call, of course, which is the original problem: the resistance of contempt to the command to love. Yet the resistance of *others* is not our concern now. Our problem is whether we ourselves believe that the death of contempt can be overcome by a life of love.

Can saints make a difference? Can the 'somethingness' of love overcome the nothingness of death? This is what is at stake in the church's talk about resurrection: whether or not life and love will not only overcome *and transform* death and contempt. Overcoming is easy – revolution and power politics can do this. *Transforming* is the challenge.

Those great lovers among us – our saints, 'secular' and 'religious' – are a test, a probing, a proving, of just such a possibility. These saints manifest a love unknown towards a future unknown, and we so desperately need them because the futures we think we know are nothing to look forward to.

Let us, then, pray for peacemakers like this.

And let us pray that more of them might arise.

And, while we wait for that prayer to be answered, let's do our best to be a little more saintly ourselves.

Because what the world needs now – as ever – is love.
