

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

**Theologising stolen land: Colonisation through the cross**

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Only a god like the God of the crucified Christ can resolve the tension many of us experience as beneficiaries of a violent colonial history.

Only a god like the God of the crucified Christ can make a gospel Yes out of the violent No of history's tragedies, including colonialism.

This is because the violence of colonisation is the violence of the crucifixion. And if the substance of salvation can wear the form of the cross, the healing yet to come can wear the vestments of colonial history.

The burden of my sermon today is how this might be so...

***The colonising God***

Consider the terrifying words of Joshua to the Israelites: "...the *LORD* drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land."

*Did* God do this? Did the "God of love" command and enable the violent displacement of the Amorites (among others) in favour of the Israelites? The moral answer required by modern sensibility is a resounding *No*, God did not.

But it's not that easy, if the Scriptures matter for our sense of God.

It's not that easy because the "gift" of this land in fulfilment of the promise to Abraham is central to the Old Testament's confession of the faithfulness of God. From Abraham through the Exodus to the occupation, in the prophets and then in the Exile, and again in the post-exilic Restoration, possession of this land is a central measure of God – a *proof* of God's faithfulness. And, of course, in the New Testament, St Paul makes not a little(!!!) of Abraham's trust in the promise of God with respect to descendants and the deliverance of Canaan.

This matters to us here and now, of course, because as for the Israelites so for us: our land, too, is bloody. And so we find ourselves seemingly in *need* of these texts because they sign God's faithfulness, while also being fully aware of the moral *problem*: everything non-indigenous Australians have is had at enormous cost to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples. While we wonder about the possibility of doing theology "on" stolen land, the scriptural text theologises the stealing: *God* did this.

***Death as method***

We can make the problem more concrete by asking, Does God kill *for God's own purposes*? Is death a *method* for God, a means to divine ends?

This opens the question up to include now the crucifixion of Jesus – the colonisation of a single body. The cross is the quintessential scriptural moment at which human and divine violence coincide. The human violence is obvious: a man is killed. The divine violence appears as an overlay on that death, with talk of ransom and sacrificial exchange hinting that God *purposed* Jesus to die.

But *do* God's purposes require killing? Did God kill the Amorites for the sake of the Israelites or kill Jesus for everyone's sake? No, God did not, although we can't say this merely because we imagine that ours is a God of love. "Love" versus "not-love" at this point simply moralises the problem, and this can't make sense of the way the Bible

circumscribes love with the language of divine violence. St John tells us that divine love is God sending “his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). We can’t happily lean on the scriptural authority of John’s “God is love”, without accounting for his interweaving of love with death.

### ***Death and the free God***

We must indeed say that God doesn’t kill or demand killing – of Amorites, Jesus or indigenous peoples. But this isn’t merely because God is love; God doesn’t kill because God doesn’t *need* to. Killing is method – a means to an end. *We* have means and methods: if this sacrifice, then that benefit – and we have found that blood can be a very effective lubricant. Because God also has purposes, it is almost irresistible to conclude that God must need means. Thus, God drives out the Amorites *in order to* fulfil the promise, and kills Jesus *in order to* save us. In this way, death now appears as a means to God’s ends.

But this over-reads the scriptural text and under-reads Christian confession. God does will and does purpose, but *needs no means* by which to achieve that will. More specifically, God has no need that we do a particular thing for God’s will to be fulfilled, certainly not that we kill. This is the importance of the doctrine of creation out of nothing. Creation out of nothing is about the *freedom of God*, such that nothing has to be in place “in order that” God can do God’s thing. God’s power to create out of nothing is the meaning of grace and the possibility of the resurrection of the dead. God is unconstrained by prior conditions. God does not kill because God doesn’t *need* anything to die for his purposes to be realised.

Why, then, *do* the Scriptures cast God as one who kills to save or to punish?

Death is not a method for God, but it is for us. We fight our way into places not ours, or fight our way out of places in which we are trapped. This is Palestine and Ukraine and our own colonial history right up to this moment, and countless other instances besides. This is the normal – even the natural – way of the political animal.

And by *simply not having drowned* under our history of violence, we survivors today find ourselves afloat upon a sea of blood: the blood of soldiers who died in wars we didn’t fight, of indigenes in colonisations we can’t undo, the lives of slaves on whose back we have built our lives, and so on. The human being is many things, but it is this also.

The question is whether God can work with this, whether the nothingness of human brokenness is the kind of nothingness out of which God creates.

----- *Selah* -----

### ***The sinful form of forgiveness: the “happy sin”***

An answer is found if we turn to the marvel – and the *moral shock* – of Christian confession, with its understanding of the dynamics of forgiveness.

The cross, of course, is central to this dynamic. In particular, it matters that the cross is *intrinsic* to a particular experience of forgiveness. An *extrinsic* account of forgiveness holds that the cross doesn’t need to know what sin I have committed. I might be an adulterer, a murderer or a thief, but in any case the cross is invoked as a *catch-all* means of reconciliation to God. An *intrinsic* account of forgiveness is one in which the cross is part of the sin I have committed. This means that, in its first moment, the cross saves *only* those who, 2000 years ago, rejected the presence of God’s kingdom in Jesus. The crucial(!) point here is that the sign of God’s blessing is cross-shaped because the crucifixion of God’s kingdom is the sin to be overcome. Put more simply, forgiveness

*cannot* – ever – forget. Forgiveness cannot forget because to forget the sin would be to forget that I have been forgiven. And I would lose myself as a new creation.

It is this which leads us into the moral jolt of forgiveness and reconciliation: any deep experience of forgiveness looks back on the particular sin as the “cause” for the present blessing: I know the blessing of reconciliation now “because” I sinned. And so, *in fear and trembling*, the church has sometimes spoken of the *felix culpa* – the happy, lucky, blessed fault. So unlikely, so unanticipated, so impossible is the vision of God had in this experience of reconciliation, that it becomes possible to imagine that God’s hand must have been in the very fault itself – possible to see God’s hand in our sin, so that we might see God and ourselves more clearly.

This is slightly overstated, but only slightly. None of this works at the level of morality, of course, which is why Paul rejects the conclusion that we should abound in sin in order that grace might abound (Romans 6:2). The idea of a blessed fault only works on a reading of the cross as sinful human violence which God has made a blessing. It’s God’s hand, and not ours, which makes this reading possible. Just as the Psalms are our words to God made into God’s Word to us, so also is the cross a pious act against a blasphemer made into a healing revelation of our own blasphemy. In the Eucharist, the body broken “for us” is *only* so because it is the body broken *by* us. How could we have known that there is a God who works like this *without* the cross? Surely, the Scriptures conclude, God must have *destined* the Son to die for us; surely *God* “did” the cross.

This is the strange, and disquieting, but *evangelical* logic of the Scriptures, by which the light does not merely contradict the darkness but comprehends it, making the darkness its own. *Our* darkness is never darkness in *God’s* sight (Psalm 130:12).

### ***Canaan as the cross***

The Scripture’s theologising of the bloody acquisition of Canaan can’t be reconciled morally, but it can be heard through this dynamic of sin-shaped forgiveness. The sin is the violent dispossession, but the blessing is the experience – or cultural memory – of having been slaves and, impossibly, freed from slavery and, impossibly, finding our way to and settling into a new homeland. So unlikely is this to have happened that it *must* have been God who did it – from the Plagues, to the drowned Egyptian charioteers, to surviving the desert, to settling in green pastures beside still waters. How could it *not* be that *the LORD* drove out the Amorites before us?

But God is no killer on this reading, even if perhaps the scriptural writers probably believed she was. This reading requires, rather, that the blessing comes *in spite* of human violence even if *in the shape of* that violence. And this is dependent principally upon a reading of the cross as a sin-shaped means of grace.

### ***God and our history, beyond morality***

Now, if we find some truth in all that, what does it tell us about our own contemporary experience of colonisation – and I mean here particularly, the experience of those who have benefited from the dispossession? Is it possible that we might come to an experience of forgiveness and reconciliation which must wonder whether God’s hand *was* in the violent processes of the colonisation of this land, in a way comparable to what I’ve proposed for the taking of Canaan?

This is a ghastly question at a moral level, and the moral answer is No, and rightly so: God did not kill by the colonist’s hands; what happened to create modern Australia has no moral justification. Yet it did happen; death *is* a method for us. And we are stuck – colonisers and colonised alike. It can’t be undone because there is no proper recompense for blood in strictly moral terms. Blood stains deeply, and it can’t be washed out.

But the gospel is that the God we are dealing with here is not a *moral* agent in the world, and doesn't deal with us according to our moral achievement or failure. God's interaction with our history is not a moral matter but a matter of the nature and possibility of forgiveness, of the willingness to remember and the requirement not to forget, and of discovering ourselves as worthy of judgement but blessed nonetheless.

Whatever might be the conflicting hopes and fears of the broader Australian community, the colonially complicit church hopes in a God who will reconcile in such a way that it will seem that things had to happen as they did, horribly wrong as they were.

The church can hope this *only* because the violence of colonisation is the violence of the crucifixion of Jesus – our colonisation of his body.

The church can hope this *only* because if the substance of salvation can wear the form of our crucifixion of the Lord of glory, so it can also wear the tragedy of colonial history.

This is the gospel for the coloniser who cannot undo the colonisation.

----- *Selah* -----

What is missing in all that I've said this morning, of course, is the perspective of the Canaanite, of the crucified, of the colonised; the perspective of the Israeli woman enjoying a weekend music festival and of the Palestinian boy whose hospital collapses on top of him. I have addressed primarily the condition of the violent and their beneficiaries – those of us who have blood on our hands. Nonetheless, the victims of violence can also be addressed through the dynamic of the cross because the victim and the victimiser are two different types of nothingness, out of which God can create. It's just that that would be another too-long, too dense sermon.

None of what I've said justifies violence or injustice. None of this lightens the moral demand for redress. The gospel is not a political program. My concern here is confession – confession of sin *and* confession of faith as to what we can expect from God. As interested as we must be in we should now *do*, I'm speaking here about what *God* will do.

If there is horror in what I've said, it must be not only in the possibility that colonialism might be destined to be found a blessing, but perhaps more profoundly in relation to the place of the cross itself in our account of God. A God who has a "use" for a crucifixion must surely be a terrifying God, and yet we confess just this God to be marvellous, and *because* of the crucifixion. God is marvellous because nothing should come back from a crucifixion, much less the crucified himself, showing us the marks cold steal leaves in flesh but speaking words of peace.

And can anything come back from colonisation or a lost referendum, or from murder or rape, or from suicide or bereavement or a terminal diagnosis? That is, can anything *good* come back from such brokenness and loss?

In terms of our moral measures of the world, it is an indeed an impossible thing we confess: history – all that we have done and has been done to us – is to be made the province of God, the *form* of God's grace-d presence to us, re-creation out of nothing.

----- *Selah* -----

### ***Can it be?***

As I struggled to bring all this to some sort of conclusion, the words of a perhaps-too-familiar hymn came to mind, which I had never quite felt in the terms I've outlined this morning:

...can it be that *I* should gain  
An int'rest in the Savior's blood?  
Died He for *me* (!?!), who *caused* His pain?  
For me (!?!), who Him to death pursued?

It's a rollicking good song to sing but perhaps this verse at least is better whispered than belted out, for it indicates the shocking proposal of the gospel: that my victim will become my salvation.

*Can* it be that the crucified God will make a gospel Yes out of the violent No of history's tragedies?

Whatever else the church might say in our wrestling with our history and with every other tragedy besides, we must – in fear and trembling – say that if we confess the *crucified* Jesus to be Lord, then we confess also that God can draw the reconciliation of *all* things out of the nothingness of human sin and violence.

Whatever moral good we must yet do to acknowledge the sins of the past and mitigate their continuing effect, these works will not justify us and we delude ourselves if we think we can make it good. Blood stains deeply, and can't be washed out.

But we are a people of the gospel. To take an image from the Seer of Revelation, we confess that with the God of the crucified Christ, Blood. Washes. White.

Can any other God do this?

“...put away then the other gods that are among you,” Joshua said to the people, “and incline your hearts to the LORD.”

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### **Prayer of response**

We bless you, great God,  
for you have created and sustained us  
and all things  
for your own name's sake,  
that we might glorify and enjoy you forever.

And yet we confess that, in thought, word and deed,  
we fail to bring you glory.

Forgive us when, wittingly or not,

our lives are lived at the cost of others,  
and we refuse to know the need for forgiveness...

Forgive us when, mindful of our failures,

we imagine that we can make good  
with this or that gesture,  
and we refuse to know the cost of forgiveness...

Forgive us then, when we withhold forgiveness,

and lack generosity and mercy;  
or refuse the consequences of being forgiven  
and lack justice and sacrifice...

Gracious God,

you bring your people home from despair  
and gave them a future of freedom and plenty.  
Do not let us rest easy with injustice,  
or wallow in our inability to heal ourselves,  
but bring us home to justice, sharing, and compassion,  
in the realm you promise all the world  
This we ask in Jesus the Christ,  
who became sin and salvation for us. Amen.

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Three related sermons:

*Salvation's sinful form (John 3:14)*

<https://marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/15-march-salvations-sinful-form/>

*The God of COVID-19 (Isaiah 53:10)*

<https://marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/5-april-the-god-of-covid-19/>

*God is a resurrecting avenger (Revelation 16)*

<https://marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/3-july-god-is-a-resurrecting-avenger/>

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