

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 23 AUGUST 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

John 6: 56-59

"Taking a Stand Against Poverty of Soul and Systems"

Jesus was not a benevolent food agency

1. Our reading from John 6 gives evidence of an internal struggle among the followers of Jesus in John's community over the identity of Jesus. Who is this that asks us to eat his body and drink his blood? We heard that many found such teaching difficult and stopped following him.

Yet, their doubts were not based on a literal reading of Jesus teaching, that Jesus wanted them to be cannibals. Not for one moment could they interpret Jesus' teaching as literal. To eat his body and drink his blood was an ancient image inviting them to become intimate companions in God's life of compassion in a bloodied and aching world. Jesus would not even spare his own life to change the world so the poor can have power and the powerful could share their resources equally.

In the Gospel of Mark we find a similar struggle and confessional crisis among the followers of Jesus in Mark's community. When Jesus tells them he must live a life that takes the way of the cross, Peter rebukes him and tells him that someone special sent from God should not have to experience such a humiliation. Jesus replies that Peter is Satan, that is, he follows the evil that works against making human life more human. As Ched Myers informs us, Jesus' way of the cross is a "specific kind of political and community practice that takes the disciples/reader into the deepest paradoxes of power" (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 235).

2. One of the deepest paradoxes of power and powerlessness that Jesus addressed was the hunger of the poor in his own time.

Yes, "one of the most popular visual representations of Jesus in the early years of the Christian movement was the feeding of the multitude" as Cynthia Campbell suggests that John Dominic Crossan points out in his book, *The Essential Jesus* (Cynthia M. Campbell, *Essential Question* (John 6:56-69), <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3434>). But Crossan has not grasped the issue of power when says that "long before Christians portrayed Christ crucified they showed him breaking bread" (Campbell)! Jesus was not a benevolent food agency.

Jesus was crucified because he challenged the political and religious systems that kept the poor hungry. He did not just feed the poor. He challenged systems that kept people poor. Jesus organised his followers and the hungry crowd to address their hunger and presented a "vision of the economic satisfaction of the masses and an ideology of sharing" (Ched Myers, 210).

In other words, to use ancient mythical language and pictures, Jesus was battling with the powers of darkness of political and religious institutions that kept people poor and hungry.

3. The issue of power can be found in the language of Ephesians 6 reading this morning. This

language described the human struggle in cosmic and military terms. Terms familiar to its ancient listeners. As one commentator puts it, there is a universal battle between powers of light and darkness:

It is not a bad metaphor for the human condition throughout the ages. The danger is in surrendering to the metaphor, and doing nothing about the condition. But that is not what the letter writer intends at all. "Therefore take up the whole armor of God," he wrote. We have the power to transform our human destiny from death to life.
(See Raven, *Bread of Life IV — Covenant: The Whole Armor of God*. <http://www.gaiarising.org/2009/08/bread-of-life-iv-covenant-whole-armor.html>)

Walter Wink, Professor Emeritus of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City and former teacher at Union Theological Seminary, connects the teaching and life of Jesus to Ephesians 6:13, "Therefore put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in that evil day and having done all to stand (*stenai*)."

("The Third Way" Dr. Walter Wink, 30 Good Minutes, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 1993. Program #3707. http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/wink_3707.htm)

Wink connects the word *withstand* (*antistennai*), to resist, to Jesus teaching on turning the other cheek, about resisting evil. He informs us that Jesus did not mean that we let people run all over us, to give up concern for justice. Which is what some people suggested to women in domestic violence situations. Jesus, writes Wink, "resisted evil with every fibre of his being".

The Greek term is *antistennai*. *Anti* [means] "against" ... *Stennai* means to stand. So, "stand against."

Resist is ... an undertranslation. ... *antistennai* is used in the Old Testament ... as a technical term for warfare. To "stand against" refers to the marching of the two armies up against each other until they actually collide with one another and the battle ensues. That is called "taking a stand."

This means keep fighting. Do not give up. But do not let evil dictate the terms. It is about expressing power based on enlightened self-interest with enlightened community. Do not turn into the thing you oppose.

Wink writes that Jesus uses the example of turning the other cheek to explain what it means to not returning evil for evil. In Semitic society, you only used your left hand for unclean tasks, which is still the case in some parts of India. So, I could only hit you on your right cheek with the back of my right hand.

Now the back of the hand is not a blow intended to injure. It is a symbolic blow. It is intended to put you back where you belong. It is always from a position of power or superiority. The back of the hand was given by a master to a slave ... What Jesus is saying is in effect, "When someone tries to humiliate you and put you down, back into your social location which is inferior to that person, and turn your other cheek.

Now in the process of turning in that direction, if you turned your head to the right, I could no longer backhand you. Your nose is now in the way. Furthermore, you can't backhand someone twice. It's like telling a joke a second time. If it doesn't work the first time, it has failed. By turning the other cheek, you are defiantly saying to the master, "I refuse to be

humiliated by you any longer. I am a human being just like you. I am a child of God. You can't put me down even if you have me killed." This is clearly no way to avoid trouble. The master might have you flogged within an inch of your life, but he will never be able to assert that you have no dignity. (Wink)

This is the way of Jesus "to resist, yes, but to resist in a way that is not injurious or harmful to the other person.' (Wink)

Finally, when the author of Ephesians writes, "take the helmet of salvation" he is suggesting that this means "a mind committed to liberation from injustice", and to "take the sword of the Spirit" means to perform acts of non-violent justice-compassion and peace. (See Raven)