

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 16 MAY 2010

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John 17: 20 - 26

“Love and the Power Beyond Ourselves”

1. From love comes glory

“From love comes glory, not vice versa”, wrote Kosuke Koyama, the former Japanese missionary and Professor of Ecumenics and World Christianity at Union Seminary in New York. This is the core teaching of John’s Jesus in our passage in John 17: 20-26. Jesus prays in John 17:24:

My parent God, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they may always see my glory which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

In this prayer, glory is associated with love, not power and might! Kosuke Koyama interrogates the notion of glory in this way:

Glory which is not rooted in love tends to be a false glory, the glory of Molech, the Canaanite god of fire. Molech demanded human sacrifice to maintain its glory. This ideology keeps imperialism alive. Daniel gives a vivid description of the spirit of imperialism:

Peoples, nations, languages! Thus are you commanded: the moment you hear the sound of horn, pipe, lyre, zither, harp, bagpipe and every other kind of instrument, you will prostrate yourselves and worship the golden statue set up by King Nebuchadnezzar [Dan. 3:4-5].

This is totalitarian. All peoples, without exception, are required to worship the golden statue that represents Nebuchadnezzar and his imperial glory. Here glory is violently monopolized. This violence is inherent in glory that is divorced from the common good, love. Nebuchadnezzar obviously found delight in prostration politics, preferring an automatic reaction to a thoughtful response to the imperial command: "The moment you hear the sound of horn, pipe, . . . prostrate yourselves!" Don't think deeply about the meaning of the command! Just do it quickly! This imperial command has been heard in every civilization in the past and present.[\[1\]](#)

Unless there is love at the heart of the glory and power of any institution, even the church, it has the potential to violate people, to distrust the common good.

Through this prayer of Jesus, we enter the mystery of mysteries! We enter the question, 'What lies at the core of the being of God, and the relationships within the being of God?' Jesus' answer: Love!

This is what attracts me to the God about whom Jesus gives witness. This makes God a safe God, one who avoids prostration religion!

2. In this prayer, we hear, through John’s reconstruction of what Jesus would have prayed, *what really mattered to Jesus!*

Jesus is praying that there would be unity among his followers, like the unity Jesus shared with God; and it is a unity in which we are to seek and risk entering human relationships, in such a way that love develops. John has grasped the central passion of Jesus! That love may be at the centre of the future life of all who follow Jesus: for present disciples, and potential followers, and consequently for the whole world!

What does this mean, to have unity, relationship in love, with friends and others who are as yet strangers, even enemies to us?

Kosuke Koyama was a teenager in Tokyo when US planes bombed the city during World War II. He was a part of the Christian minority in Japan. We can imagine how difficult it was to be a follower of Jesus in those times. They were considered an enemy within their own country as well as an enemy of those who bombed them. Koyama recalled the courageous words of his minister when he was baptised during that time: 'Kosuke, God calls you in Jesus Christ to love all your neighbors, even the Americans.'^[2]

For the rest of his life, his theology and practice sought to express this kind of love for the stranger. I remember reading his astounding book in the 1980s, about contextual mission, *Water Buffalo Theology*, which he wrote in 1974.

After he received his doctorate from Princeton Theological Seminary in the US, he went to Thailand as a missionary from 1960 to 1968. For him, theology begins from people's experience. Central to that experience is the notion that we are to find ways of negotiating the divide between cultures! That we are called to find creative ways to build respectful, mutual relationship, always driven by love of the other for who they are, rather than for who we want them to be.

This is a challenging, unsettling and disturbing process, but only this process disassembles the walls that we make to secure us in separate worlds, worlds that reduce love to kinship and similarity and likeness. Love is at the heart of this deconstructive disassemblance!

This deconstructive process is as much about our learning about and transforming our own personality, as it is any closed unit we produce: our family, our church, our organisation, our institutions, our culture, our nation!

This is why I constantly seek to learn from the life and teaching of Jesus, from the Enneagram, from psychoanalysis, and from going overseas to do these coaching courses in the next three weeks. I am driven by a passion to become more of an open person, and express love in community for the glory of people, particularly the most vulnerable, with other passionate travellers!

3. Now, we are always in mission as Koyama expressed it, as Jesus prayed for it, that is, shaping and refashioning ourselves, the other and our context to create unity, relationship. Mission is to engage ourselves and others in a way that truly reveals the actual condition of things and cooperates with others to bring new possibility in that situation. And experience teaches us that love needs to be created, and it requires regular newness!

As W H Auden imaged it in his poem, *As I walked Out One Evening*, love is so easily a victim of the time and anxiety; it can be subdued and overwhelmed by all forms of distractions and brokenness. Auden's passion was to uncover the fragile nature of love. He desired in his language and images to reveal the truth of love in its fluctuations and inauthenticities, to disenchant and disintoxicate it.^[3]

In the film, *Feast of Love*, Harry Stevenson (played by Morgan Freeman) is a man of mature years who extends mutuality and support to his grieving wife and to many people he meets, especially 30-something Bradley (Greg Kinnear).

[I have shared this story with you before, and I do so again with a different emphasis].

Bradley struggles to know how to find a meaningful relationship. On the surface of life, Harry loves others, and is stable. Yet, the relentlessness of life, in the sudden death of a young man in his community, Oscar, shatters his personality. He is torn from his secure moorings!

It's awful, wasn't it! Too sad! Unspeakable!
God is either dead or he despises us.

Disenchantment, the unspeakable, can emerge at any time. Our life can plunge into the depths of despair at any time, and somehow another part of ourselves seems to surface.

We need to realise this reality. And this is not because some of us are more fragile than others! Far from it! We all have a fragile aspect to ourselves. Actually, we are all divided selves. We are just not aware of it: we repress it, and our society and the church reinforces this fictive wholeness idea! We have the public personality, and then we also have an unseen, unconscious part. We construct our self in such a way that we think what we know everything about ourselves.

This divided self is the paradox of being human. We are contradictory beings. In this is our beauty and our aliveness! Auden's favourite quotation came from Montaigne: "We are, I know not how, double in ourselves..." [\[4\]](#)

We are most open to love when we are most engaged in life, and that means open to accept and own our paradoxical selves in situations of contradiction. In the most awful event of the death of Oscar, Harry Stevenson shares his despair with Bradley. And Bradley, who has grown to understand his own paradoxical self through Harry's friendship, now supports Harry with the power that love has. Bradley shares that Oscar's wife knew he would die, but still risked marrying and loving him:

Yes Harry, she did [know he could die]. And she didn't run away or crawl into a hole. She found them a house. She threw away her birth-control and she married him.

God doesn't hate us Harry. If God did, God would not have made our hearts so brave.

Here, unity, relationship, and love, is recreated in the stuff of chaotic and unpredictable life.

4. Conclusion

W H Auden imaged the truth about the fragility of love and the chaos of life, thus disenchanting it. "And yet", writes Josephine Hart,

"he himself ... had been enchanted. One night in 1933, 'something happened' ... Of this seminal experience Auden wrote, 'I felt myself invaded by a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine. For the first time in my life I knew exactly - because thanks to that power, I was doing it - what it means to love's ones neighbour as oneself.'" [\[5\]](#)

Certainly, this is reflected in the following three stanzas of his poem that he wrote after this event, *As I walked out one evening*:

'O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress:
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.

'O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart.'

It was late, late in the evening,
The lovers they were gone;
The clocks had ceased their chiming,
And the **deep river** ran on.^[6]

To conclude, not only are we divided selves who require the dialectical process of disenchantment and re-enchancement, but human beings need a power greater than themselves to truly live love beyond the divides within the self and reproduced in society.

[1] Kosuke Koyama, *So They May See My Glory (John 17:24)*, *the Christian Century*, May 3, 1989, p. 467.

[2] Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama, *Christian Century*, May 5, 2009

[3] Josephine Hart, *Catching Life By The Throat*, 10.

[4] *Op Cit.*

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Note: the italics are my emphasis!