

Christian Peacemakers and What We Can Learn From Them

Speech by Justin Whelan delivered to “Growing Peace in Kogarah” forum of Christian and Muslim perspectives on peace and nonviolence in a multi-religious society, 17 November 2005

One of Jesus’ most famous sayings is “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”. A quick scan of church history suggests this is also one of the most confusing sayings of Jesus, or perhaps just one of the most ignored. The history of the church is, I’m afraid to say, largely a history of violence. And yet somehow, almost despite ourselves, the Gospel is handed on from generation to generation – and to each generation God sends us prophets calling us back from the brink of our own destruction.

I want to talk tonight about a few Christian peacemakers and what we can learn from them. Speaking for myself, I find that learning about the saints of history can be a powerful motivator. Who didn’t shed a tear at the end of the movie *Schindler’s List* or get an extra spring in their step when South African became free?

But our heroes do not just inspire us – they teach us. They show us the path that we must follow as we live out our vocation as children of God. If we have ‘ears to hear’, they speak to us with both encouragement and challenge. We are fortunate that the church has many such prophets to draw on, some of them famous around the world, many of them unknown.

Of course it is not only the Christian Church that has received such voices of sanity in an insane world – we can and do give thanks also for such people as Abdul Khan, Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. But my brief is to talk about Christian peacemakers – although in the spirit of the inter-faith theme of this forum I have chosen people who explicitly worked to cross boundaries, overcome fear and build peace between divided people.

Martin Luther King Jr

The first person I want to talk about tonight is Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. Now don’t go forgetting that “Jr” – the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Senior was “a giant of a man” in his own right! But for various reasons we don’t have time for tonight, “Junior” turned up at the right place at the right time and discovered he had a gift for the nation.

I’m going out on a limb in guessing that everyone here recognises the name or Dr King and his connection to the USA Civil Rights Movement of which he was a leading member and regular spokesman. Most of you will have heard his famous “I have a dream” speech in 1963. Some will know he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

Dr King led the civil rights movement through a series of campaigns of nonviolent action which progressively dismantled segregation and discrimination laws not only in the South but also the North of the United

States. In doing so he put the church at the centre of the struggle for black justice, showed up the hypocrisy of white America, and demonstrated the power of active nonviolence to achieve positive social change. Dr King is now considered the world's foremost Christian theologian of nonviolence.

Dr King gave a great many speeches and sermons which inspire all who read them. I encourage you to look them up on the Internet – especially the Letter from Birmingham Jail which will one day be seen as one of the great theological treatises of the 20th century and perhaps the definitive text on nonviolent civil disobedience. I think this Letter is so important I have brought a few copies with me tonight which you will find on the back table, feel free to take one home.

But Dr King did not stop at speeches and sermons: he led illegal marches through the streets of Birmingham, he was beaten by police in Selma, he went to jail regularly. He worked with a President on the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. After becoming a nationwide hero he became the first public figure to oppose the Vietnam War, for which he was vilified once again. Within 2 years the majority of Americans had realised he was right. Now almost everyone knows he was right

In doing all this, Dr King taught us many lessons which remain as relevant today as they were then:

1. The Christian Gospel is a gospel of nonviolence.
2. Even democratic countries can enact unjust laws and use brutal violence to uphold them.
3. None of us are free until all of us are free – our fates are bound to each other
4. Non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good.
5. Sometimes the only way to confront injustice is to break the law – but you must do so non-violently and prayerfully.
6. The people we demonise today may become the heroes of tomorrow
7. Being a prophet of justice can get you killed. On April 4, 1968 Martin Luther King was assassinated on the balcony of his motel in Memphis, Tennessee by a sniper who it is now commonly accepted was a member of the FBI.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

My second Christian peacemaker is a German man by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 and died in 1945 in a concentration camp in southern Germany, only weeks before the end of World War 2 and by specific order of Adolf Hitler. He was a Protestant theologian who became centrally involved in the “Confessing Church”, so named because it confessed allegiance to Jesus rather than Hitler, which was of course illegal.

Bonhoeffer was the first person to speak on German radio in support of the Jews and criticising the Nazi government's increasing oppression – back in 1934. As well as using his position to evacuate Jews to Switzerland, he

became loosely involved in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler in 1944 despite his pacifist views. This remains one of the great controversies of his life among those of us able to reflect on it from the comfort of very different times. Caught by his choice of complicity by omission and complicity by commission, Bonhöffer struggled for some time as to how God called him. His final analysis was that “It is worse to be evil than to do evil”, which for him meant he had to help kill Hitler to stop a greater tragedy.

While we can argue about whether or not he was right, I think a great lesson for all of us is that moral choices are not simple and abstract. There is always a context, and there is always ambiguity. When we deny this we become fundamentalists to our ideologies, whether they be religious, political or cultural. When we do this we deny God the chance to speak to our times and our situation.

The other great lesson that Bonhöffer teaches us is that we must remain true to our religious beliefs in the face of political pressure. Bonhöffer and the Confessing Church refused to accept that God was an agent of a political party, and refused to accept that silence was an available option for the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth in the face of oppression and violence. Bonhöffer coined the terms “cheap grace” and “costly grace” to describe the dilemma facing the church. Cheap grace assumes there are no consequences of God’s grace, that we need do nothing in return. On the contrary, grace is costly, because it calls us to follow the way of the Cross, to our own deaths if necessary.

For Bonhöffer, as his politically engaged life makes apparent, the church’s gift to society is truthful proclamation of the gospel. It is by the performance of truthful testimony that church serves the world. Telling the truth in our lives together is not sectarian but it is political, because it deals with our lives in community together. In an age of 30-second political advertisements, truthful speech remains as meaningful to democracies as it is to inveighing against totalitarian regimes.

Christian Peacemaker Teams

My third example is not an individual but an organisation called Christian Peacemaker Teams, or CPT.

CPT arose from a challenge in 1984: “What would happen if Christians devoted the same discipline and self-sacrifice to nonviolent peacemaking that armies devote to war?”

Enlisting the whole church in an organized, nonviolent alternative to war, today CPT places violence-reduction teams in crisis situations and militarized areas around the world at the invitation of local peace and human rights workers. CPT embraces the vision of unarmed intervention waged by committed peacemakers ready to risk injury and death in bold attempts to transform lethal conflict through the nonviolent power of God’s truth and love.

CPT's ministry of Biblically-based and spiritually-centred peacemaking emphasizes creative public witness, nonviolent direct action and protection of human rights. CPT currently has people working in Iraq, Palestine, Burundi, Colombia and the United States, working alongside Christians, Muslims and Jews. As an aside, if you want to know what's really going on in Baghdad, CPT has a weekly email¹ that I cannot recommend highly enough – but I warn you that the truth is often not easy to read.

It's hard to describe the work that CPT does in a way which really captures what it's about. Having never been in a war zone or even a place of constant violence, I find it hard to conceptualise what "nonviolent intervention" really means in that context. The best I can do, I think, is to read out a powerful reflection written by a CPTer from Baghdad earlier this year.

IRAQ REFLECTION: Too much²
by Sheila Provencher (CPT) 19 May 2005

The air was heavy today (May 12)--cloudy, oppressive, humid, weather rare for Baghdad. Yesterday, Wednesday, seventy-one people died in car bombs in at least three cities.

Can you imagine what it is like, every time you set out in a car across the city to wonder if you will return? What it is like to drive down Sadoon Street and see two overturned and burned-out cars in front of ruined storefronts ravaged by the explosions? What it is like to be sitting in the Royal Jordanian Airlines office at the Palestine Hotel complex and you hear the ripping sound of the bombs and then you see the smoke about a half-mile away?

I don't run to the bombsite because I can't do anything. I just sit there and wonder how many people are dead, and pray for them, and for the people who set the bombs, and at the same time I feel glad that it wasn't me there on the street. Your mind does these things. "Thank God it wasn't me." But it was someone.

It's too much. There have been too many gunshots, too many tanks rolling by in Amira's mother's neighbourhood, too many sounds of target practice from the nearby American base mixed with the sound of kids laughing in the backyard playing with newly-hatched ducklings and bleating sheep.

It is insane. Every day I feel "I have to get out of here." The only way I've found to respond to the fear is to sit still, breathe, and go deep, deep, at least once per day. I try to remember that we are all together, really, and that my individual death would not stop this mysterious,

¹ You can subscribe by sending an email to cptiraq@cpt.org

² <http://cpt.org/archives/2005/may05/0029.html>.

beautiful Oneness that holds us. We all ARE. When I remember that, in my body and soul, then I can hear little Huda's singing again even as I see her looking out the taxi window at the wreckage. I can imagine the sound of a young soldier's baby laughing, even though he is thousands of miles away. I can be breathlessly grateful that I am here to follow what I believe, that RISKING friendship and common ground is the only lasting way to reach beyond the violence that surrounds us.

"Al Hamdu l'Allah," Iraqis say all the time. "Thanks be to God," for everything. I wish that we could all really see God's Oneness, and be free.

A strategy developed thoughtfully over the years by CPT has taught us that:

- trained, skilled, international teams can work effectively to support local efforts toward nonviolent peacemaking;
- “getting in the way” of injustice through direct nonviolent intervention, public witness and reporting to the larger world community can make a difference;
- peace team work engages congregations, meetings and support groups at home to play a key advocacy role with policy makers – which of course we must do.

A final thought:

I don't have time to go into his life, but in order that his witness be remembered here tonight I want to finish with a quote from a modern martyr, Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador. Romero was assassinated by a US-trained death squad in 1980 while celebrating Mass. Two years earlier, Oscar Romero preached a sermon that Bonhöffer and King would have applauded.

"A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, a word of God that doesn't touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed," said Romero, "what gospel is that?"

Thank you.