

13th after Pentecost (A): CCSY; 11/09/11
Exod 14:19-31; Ps 114; Rom 14:1-12; Matt 18: 21-35
10th anniversary of 9/11

There are only two feelings. Love and fear. There are only two languages. Love and fear. There are only two activities. Love and fear. There are only two motives, two procedures, two frameworks, two results. Love and fear. Love and fear.¹

So writes cartoonist Michael Leunig in *A Common Prayer*. Love has been the welcome focus of our readings and our reflections from this pulpit over the last two Sundays. Today, both the date, and the diet of Scripture served up to us by the Church's table of readings, demand that we face love's 'other': fear.

Violence, in whatever form, is essentially a function – an outworking – of fear. And one of things we fear most is difference. A few weeks ago we heard the very start of the story of Exodus – a narrative that is launched by Pharaoh's xenophobia, his fear of having his own people's identity erased by Israel's difference: 'Look', he says, 'the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them...' Having endured oppression bordering on slavery, we rejoin the story today with Israel's fear-filled bid to escape, which is on the verge of being thwarted by Pharaoh's fear of losing a cheap and effective labour source.

As the story goes, written of course from the perspective of the winners, as history or legend always is, God fights on Israel's side, securing their freedom. Oh yes, and a few thousand Egyptians soldiers who had turned up for work that morning died in the process. Our reading stops just at the point where Moses and his sister-in-law Miriam burst into song, gloating over Israel's victory, and praising God for teaching those imperial overlords a jolly good lesson: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea', Miriam beats out on her tambourine. But this is not the Carpenters singing a folk song; this is fear-driven violence and its ugly aftermath, including a problematic legacy in holy writ – and, however much we love and esteem the Scriptures, sometimes we need to read against the grain a little, for sometimes God's word is more of a mirror than a lamp: holding up to ourselves our worst features; our making of God in our own image.

And when we make God in our own image, people invariably suffer and die.

As the Apostle Paul knows all too well, from the Church's earliest days Christians have been just as quick to claim God for their own small causes as have adherents of other great religious traditions: quick to condemn worship or practices that are different from what is thought to be the right way. Paul exhorts the first-century church community in Rome to stop quarrelling over diversity in devotional habits such as dietary disciplines. Twenty centuries later Christians have moved on from arguing about food; now we argue about sex instead!

1 Michael Leunig, *A Common Prayer: A cartoonist talks to God* (Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1990), n.p.

Paul's appeal for putting these secondary issues into perspective is based on a very simple, but hugely significant question. If I may paraphrase the Apostle, it goes something like this: do we think heaven is a big place, or a small place? If we think heaven is a big place, then we'll all find space before the throne of grace; there's room for everyone, and we can afford to love. If we think heaven's a small place, then be very, very afraid; because there won't be room for everyone, and we'd better make darn sure that God knows who belongs, which is easy enough to tell, as they're the ones just like us.

Our Gospel reading today reminds us that in Jesus' vision of the Kingdom, heaven is a big place – a place where, in the words of the psalmist (85:10), mercy and truth are met, and justice and peace have embraced; but, as the story he tells Peter makes mortifyingly clear, for fear over trifles, we seem hell-bent on making heaven small.

This parable is indeed a mirror. It confronts us with the ugly truth that violence is not 'out there' somewhere; violence, and the capacity for violence, is 'in here'. It's latent in our sense of entitlement and superiority; it's in our fear that we cannot, after all, save ourselves, which makes us close-fisted, clinging to and defending whatever it is that keeps the illusion to the contrary alive. It's in our 'othering' of others, including those who might be driven to violence, as though that's somehow *their* problem in strange, far away places, and not ours. It *is* our problem: in our churches; and in our respectable, familiar suburban homes; and on our sporting fields and roads; and outside our nightclubs; and in our homophobia, racism, and misogyny; it *is* our problem, wherever human hearts – including our own – are fearful.

Violence tends to spiral, to escalate, until someone has the courage to cut through what is essentially an economy of exchange – tit for tat – with grace, which alone can absorb and transform violence.

As the *Koran* teaches: 'Repair the evil done to you with something that is better. And lo! The enemy who did evil to you may turn into a close and true friend.'²

Forgiveness is one such mechanism of grace; forgiveness which, as the word itself suggests, is a gift rather than a transaction; forgiveness, which all who are bold enough to pray the Lord's Prayer might be expected to practice with the integrity of those who know their own need of it.

Jesus pulls no punches with Peter's ambit claim to generosity of spirit in being willing to forgive as many as seven times, undermining the very premise of all such moral calculus with this parable. But, as endlessly repeated images of buildings absorbing planes warn us, absorbing and transforming violence is costly; and the forgiveness of which Jesus speaks is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would have called 'costly grace'.³

² As cited by Richard Holloway, in *On Forgiveness* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002), fronticepiece.

³ "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without . . . repentance . . . absolution without . . . confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross . . . Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell at that he has . . . Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again . . . It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man his only true life." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York:

There are only two feelings, two languages, two motives: love and fear.

What really motivates me? Which language do I speak?

Is heaven is a big place, or a small place?

And my heart – is it a big place, filled with love, where evil can be absorbed and repaired, and there is room for difference? Or is my heart a small space, tightened by fear, where violence rebounds?

Because if God's will *is* to be done on earth, as in heaven, in here is where it starts.

Richard Treloar
Christ Church South Yarra

MacMillan, 1963 [1937]), 47. Bonhoeffer was executed towards the end of WWII for his part in a plot to assassinate Hitler.