

The “Peace & Justice” Mantra

Colleagues,

[Crossings office manager, Cathy Lessmann, reminds me to remind you of the gift-giving option for our Crossings operation that always comes at the end of each listserve posting. It'll be there at the end of this one too. You get the message.]

In last Sunday's worship in our congregation we were encouraged to join Jesus in his “ministry of peace and justice” for the world. For a long while I've been scratching my head when those words appear in preaching and in prayer. They pop up everywhere in Christian language these days. They've become a mantra. Everybody's for peace and justice. Jesus was working for peace and justice. Christ's disciples are called to create a world of peace and justice. Sez who?

When did that doublet, peace and justice, become such an automatic mantra in Christian rhetoric? When did it become so p.c.? And why? Concretely, what are we praying for when we mention the doublet? Did Jesus ever designate his own ministry as peace & justice? And if not, why not?

My thesis is: The ministry of the Manged Messiah was NOT the ministry of peace and justice that this mantra invokes these days.

Here's some support for the thesis. What folks seem to have in mind when commending “peace and justice,” is (to use Luther's Biblical imagery) assigned by God to his agents of the left hand. The godly agenda of these left-hand agents is civil righteousness in God's old creation. Though peace & justice are indeed good and godly, they are not assigned to Jesus at all. To stick with Luther's image of the ambidextrous deity, Jesus is

God's right-hand man. His assignment is God's right-hand task that none of God's left-handers ever did fulfill, nor could fulfill. In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself—a.k.a. getting sinners forgiven. As God's original, only-begotten, right-hander, it's no surprise that after fulfilling his assignment he now "sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty" with authorization to be on the bench on Judgment Day.

I don't know how to research the question: "WHEN did this peace-and-justice combo become the p.c. language for Christian action, for Christian prayer?" I know it wasn't around when I was a kid. So I'll go with some hunches. It became vogue when the notion of the Kingdom of God moved away from its native focus (in the NT) on God's promise in Christ to forgive sinners, and came to be understood as a God's program for world renewal. The self-understood referents for peace and justice—as I listen to contemporary religious rhetoric—is for a world where folks live without warfare, where swords become plowshares, and where equitable justice reigns among peoples. Here's my crass claim: Never once does any NT text predicate that agenda to Jesus. His job is to get sinners forgiven, get lost children back to their Father, get the task of God-sinner reconciliation done. Jesus' job is "God-relations." The peace & justice mantra is all about "human relations." God-relations is Jesus' full-time job. He dedicates his entire life to it. Key word is promise, not program.

Not too long ago one of you dear colleagues, a guest writer for ThTh postings in the past, suggested that I was possibly "stuck" on the God-sinner reconciliation agenda and not framing the Kingdom of God broadly enough. You told me: "The promises of the coming kingdom in the prophets are much more than forgiveness; they also are about abundant food, water in the wilderness, the liberation of slaves and exiles, healing of the lame, blind, and

deaf, coming home to one's land and occupation, and peace between peoples."

Which prompted this reply:

1. And none of that ever happened anywhere in the OT except in very isolated instances, did it? And even at the hand of Jesus after individual "signs" of healing the lame, blind and deaf, there was no general improvement in the public health in that corner of the Roman Empire. Where IN REAL HISTORY did the prophets' "peaceable kingdom" ever show up? Even after Jesus came, it didn't happen either. He himself didn't restore any Eden-Garden anywhere before his departure when he was "in charge." And after his departure (when he still is "in charge" as the Dominus of 2004 years of Anno Domini) it never happened either, except here and there, and then still ephemeral. When Constantine declared the Roman Empire "Christian," there is no evidence that I know of about "peace & justice" improving anywhere in the realm. And when later the HOLY Roman Empire came on the scene, loaded with Christian premises, peace and justice remained as iffy as it had been before.
2. So unless Jesus was conning us all with his kingdom talk, his kingdom must have been about something else. And of course it was. His kingdom is NOT what the prophets were talking about with the items mentioned above. His kingdom was what the prophets couldn't deliver, even super-prophet Moses. That's the whole point of the Jesus-and-Moses contrast in John 6. Forgiveness of sinners (=Life that lasts, that can lick death) is what Moses' bread was unable to do. Jesus' mission was different. Radically different. Jesus claims his bread is to get sinners to live forever. It's a promise in God-relations, not a program in human-relations. And in John 6 the evangelist

wants us to understand that the “Moses manna” is not just the morning edibles the Israelites gathered in the Sinai, but the “Manna” of Sinaitic Torah. Patently the morning edibles didn’t get sinners forgiven, but neither could the bread of Sinai’s covenant. It couldn’t get sinners unsinners; it couldn’t offer them the bread for life that lasts.

3. My respondent continued: “Wouldn’t it be good to hear on Sunday mornings what Norman Borlaug did with Mexipak wheat fueling the Green Revolution, what Dag Hammarskjöld did for peace in the Congo, how Florence Nightingale with her good deaconess training helped to reform nursing, and how liberationists of various stripes worked for land reform, and how Wilberforce worked to end the slave trade and even folks like Charles Colson worked to bring hope to folks sitting in prison? Yes, these people are some of the vehicles through whom Christ carried out his promises of bringing the kingdom.” To which I replied: Couldn’t disagree more with your last sentence. We must make distinctions. [That’s a Lutheran mantra!] All that great good stuff by these great people is God’s good left-hand work. None of it is ever assigned to the Incarnate Logos as his agenda according to the NT gospels. I’m reminded of one specific text, Luke 12:13. Jesus gets asked to adjudicate a legal conflict between two brothers. He opts out. “Not my job,” he says. “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And if he did speak a second sentence, it might have been: “My Father has assigned such peace & justice work to other agents. I’m on a different assignment—to help both you guys become rich toward God.” Those last three words conclude the parable that follows. Jesus’ work is God-relations. God’s southpaws work in human-relations. If Jesus refuses to take on the ministry of left-hand peace and justice, who

“sets us” to rewrite his assignment?

4. The great left-hand work of these great folks—Borlaug, Hammarskjöld and Nightingale—was not Christ’s kingdom. Or if it was, then the evidence to document that is personal confessions—of sin and of faith. “God, be merciful to me a sinner. Lord I believe; Help thou mine unbelief.” One signal that such good and great stuff of peace and justice is left-hand stuff is that it didn’t last. The Green Revolution has become a mixed-bag. The Congo is chaos again. Where is there land-reform that has made a lasting difference? The slave trade, e.g., worldwide sex slavery, is back again with a vengeance, etc. This is not to say these heroes should not have done it. Nor to denigrate their great efforts—and benefits. Rather to rejoice that in these instances—even if just for a while, the “care” part of the offertory collect about “care and redemption of all that you God have made” did actually happen. But then to go on to say that even with such courageous left-hand work, the Kingdom Christ brings did not show up there. It does not, it cannot, appear through God’s left-hand agencies. Only one agency brings that kingdom, God’s NEW management systems for sinners, viz., “That repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached in his name.” And when that agency elicits a trust-response, THERE the Kingdom comes that Christ was sent to effect. It’s also in the Johannine “great commission” [John 20]— “As the Father sent me, so send I you. If you forgive the sins of any, for them God’s forgiveness happens! And if you, or somebody else, doesn’t do it, it never happens.”
5. When folks say that Christ’s kingdom is “much more than forgiveness,” I twitch. Almost sounds like forgiveness of sinners is small potatoes, but the real biggies are a reconstituted paradise of “abundant food, water in the wilderness, the liberation of slaves and exiles, healing

of the lame, blind, and deaf, coming home to one's land and occupation, and peace between peoples."If that's what Jesus's kingdom-talk and kingdom-work was really about, then why/how – even theoretically– can his crucifixion & resurrection (clearly central as THE Gospel core in the witnesses we have) generate such a society of peace and justice? What's the connection, the cause-effect linkage? Is there any way to show that a crucified/risen Messiah is generative of the paradise world we all long for? I know of no one in the history of theology who has demonstrated that to bring in the "peaceable kingdom" it'll take a Messiah on a cross.

We need to take a closer look at the terms peace and justice, for each one is indeed linked to Jesus in NT texts. But with a difference. His kingdom operation is to terminate the hostility between God and sinners. When he "breathes" on his disciples Easter Sunday evening in John's gospel, that's the breeze–the holy gust–that's blowing on them. "My peace I give to you, not the world's (left-hand) kind. Here is shalom in God-relations.

And the justice that comes with that peace is not the equity justice of the modern mantra. It's the exact opposite. When sinners get equity justice from God, you always wind up with dead sinners. Not so the justice ministry of Jesus. His "justice ministry" is "mercy justice" for sinners. He takes the equity justice, the death sentence, in his body on a tree. And from his done deal he offers us a "life" sentence. Which he promises will hold up from here to eternity–right on through Judgment Day and then beyond.

This peace and justice confusion about the Kingdom of God has been around throughout the church's history. It may even been present when the NT documents were being

written. I have a hunch that John's gospel is a corrective to such confusion in his own time. Why else would he pass on to us such explicit words from Jesus that "my peace" is not what passes in the world for peace. Or Jesus' long dialogue (only in John) with Pilate that his kingdom is NOT the world's kind of kingdom. It's not that his is real and the world's is phony. Both are real, but they are on different turfs. In classical Lutheran Latin lingo, one is *coram deo* (God-relations), the other *coram hominibus* (human-relations).

Such confusion surfaced in gory fashion right in the midst of the Lutheran reformation too. Thomas Muentzer, Luther's one-time student and later public enemy, claimed that a paradise restored was what the Kingdom of Christ meant. And if the violators of such a peaceable kingdom, the princes and landlords, wouldn't make restitution peacefully, then by the sword it would have to be done. Granted, the princes were ungodly and demonstrated their bestiality as they butchered the oppressed. Even so, Muentzer's theology of Christ's kingdom was wrong. His vision was akin to Pilate's in the long Johannine dialogue Jesus had with him. It was a kingdom "of this world" different in kind from the "not of this world" kingdom Jesus described as his own to Pilate.

6. Since Christ's cross & resurrection didn't generate such a paradise-world anywhere in the Roman Empire, what are the conclusions? Jesus was a charlatan? That's plausible. More plausible, and more explicit in the NT kingdom texts is that Jesus' Kingdom is something else than the kingdom envisioned by Pilates and Muentzers and today's paradise-seekers. What do we do with his explicit claim to Pilate that his kingdom is "not of this world"? That doesn't mean it's pie-in-the-sky. Instead it means that the agenda he's

working on is a different one from “world-restoration.” It is a new way for God to “king it” over sinners, a new regime, a new way for God to “manage” sinners so that they don’t wind up dead, but live forever. It’s a kingdom about which Pilate doesn’t have a clue, bridging the God-Sinner gap—which no one “of this world,” not even the best folks (e.g., Moses) were ever able to pull off. Pilate, too, doubtless thought such a kingdom was no big deal, finally irrelevant to the serious difficulties of daily life. And he has lots of allies these days too. So what else is new? The world’s majority has always sided with Pilate about the irrelevance of any kingdom of forgiveness, God’s included. John the Baptizer did not revamp Jewish society with his baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Neither did Jesus when he picked up the forgiveness theme himself and concretely enacted it. The convinced were always a remnant, a little flock. But Christians, of all people, ought not get conned into minimizing the God-relations rescue and claiming that Christ’s kingdom is “much more than forgiveness.” How far away is that from what Paul tells the Galatians is an “other” gospel? For such other gospels you don’t need a crucified Messiah. For such gospels “Christ died in vain.”

7. Seems to me that the apocalyptic Gospel texts of recent Sundays are “perfectly clear.” Heaven and earth will pass away, Jesus claimed, even the social-Gospel improved society that we, here and there, are able to confect. But such oases of left-hand peace & justice are ephemeral. “Renewed and improved” old creation, yes, but still OLD creation. Not immune to the divine verdict “Not good enough to last,” ergo it too will pass away.
8. If it is Apocalypse Now—as I think it is—then the last book of the NT is our standard-bearer. And the Christian calling is to be “hustling the Lamb” (a.k.a. Christum

treiben) for/with all the folks we bump into as the apocalypse comes over the horizon and “we all fall down.” Christ calls us to be awake, that is, conscious that the four horsemen of the apocalypse and THE BEAST (once the Roman Empire and now the one and only empire still around) will be calling the shots, will be orchestrating the world’s destruction. Therefore “abundant food, water in the wilderness, the liberation of slaves and exiles, healing of the lame, blind, and deaf, coming home to one’s land and occupation, and peace between peoples” doesn’t happen when it’s apocalypse now. Read the headlines.

9. Au contraire. And why? Because God is turning loose the 4 apocalyptic destroyers. That’s what John the seer says. They come with divine authorization. Therefore we’re not gonna stop ‘em. Sure they terrorize us all, but they are the “rod of God’s anger,” and no one (even the Lamb’s worshippers) in John’s apocalypse escapes the war, plague, famine, fire. The Lamb’s worshippers trust, not that they will escape these grim-reapers, but that the Lamb’s resurrection is their grounds for hope—even as all the parameters of left-hand peace and justice crumble. Such hope is not pie-in-the-sky. It’s planting your OLIVE tree (so Pastor Mitri Raheb of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem) even as the Israeli soldiers come again to destroy your life’s work. It’s doing the “inasmuch” stuff of Matt 25, howsoever you can, as the sky continues to fall in. But still not resting your hope on what you can achieve there, since it too shall pass away. As Bob Bertram liked to say: “Hope needs success.” The only big success we’ve heard of—an Advent invasion from up front, beamed back into our law-of-sin-and-death world—is the One who conquered death, the death that otherwise always conquers all sinners. For sinners to hope in him makes sense, given the other options available.

10. That is what the Kingdom of God is all about. It's about "God-relations" being healed. Here's one description (Luther, Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Second Petition): "What is the kingdom of God? Answer: simply what we learned in the Creed, namely that God sent his Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil and to bring us to himself and rule us as a king of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience. To this end he also gave his Holy Spirit to teach us this through his holy Word and enlighten and strengthen us in faith by his power. We pray here at the outset that all this may be realized in us and that . . . led by the Holy Spirit many may come into the kingdom of grace and become partakers of salvation, so that we may all remain together eternally in this kingdom." Christ's kingdom is a Good-News promise in God-relations. It's coram deo stuff. The word "eternally" in the last line above signals both the kingdom's turf (vis-a-vis the Eternal One) and its durability (forever and ever). Partial paradises in human relations, even extensive world-peace and equity-justice among peoples, are not "what is the Kingdom of God." For one thing, they cannot pass the "eternal" durability test. In Jesus' words, they still "pass away." They are part of heaven-and-earth. They are never death-proof. Death-proofing is a coram deo agenda.

You have to have death behind you in order to be death-proof for the future. Which comes with the peace and justice generated by the Manged Messiah. Which was the peace the angelic messengers were proclaiming. Yes, it was "on earth" (Hallelujah!) but it was a Peace with God (double Hallelujah!) that earthlings can never pull off. This promissory peace renders its trusters death-proof, Judgment Day survivors, even before it happens. This is

the promise all Christ-trusters cling to—also as they take their last breath. The last line of Luther’s apocalyptic hymn “A Might Fortress” highlights its chutzpah: “Das Reich muss uns doch bleiben. This Kingdom MUST be ours forever.” Why the “must”? God has “gotta” do it. He promised.

Peace (you know whose) and Joy (ditto)!

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