Lent 2 2023

John 3: 1-17 Reflections based on Sam Well’s book *Love Mercy*

Ch 2

The second week of connecting our gospel to our exploration of Mercy. In today’s gospel Jesus tells Nicodemus it is necessary to be born again of water and the Spirit. Flesh can give birth only to flesh. It is the Spirit that gives birth to the Spirit. If you disbelieve me when I talk to you about things on earth, how are you to believe if I should talk of the things of heaven? The Son of Man is to be lifted high as the serpent was lifted by Moses so that everyone who has faith in him may have eternal life.

We need the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to be reconciled to self, God and community in order to walk the path to peace and mercy. We need to learn how to be kind to the self. If **unkindness** is the foundational frame through which we see the world we will struggle to see God and to grow in his presence.

Again I ask you to focus on a particular area of conflict so you can apply Sam Well’s ideas. Are you taking an interest in the debate around a voice to parliament? Or perhaps it is more fruitful to think about a particular dispute that has hurt you, or a part of yourself you dislike. There is a basic question that underpins our process. Do you want to be closer to God who can bring us peace?

Peace is about learning a different set of habits and it may begin with seeing creativity rather than destructiveness and tension.

Imagine school yard fight. Three possible scenarios emerge. ‘She started it’….

‘She stole my’…. This is the plaintive cry of the weaker party. A litany of injustices is perpetuated.

Third response ‘We were only playing’. Wells calls this obfuscating step as and more sinister. It is the winning party that makes this statement. It is the root form of denial.

In each case there is deep resistance of both parties to acknowledge how profoundly invested they have become in a conflict.

Truth is the first casualty of war and untruth can mean denying there is a war in the first place. It is necessary to say ‘We are enemies and this situation is bringing out the worst in both of us. I don’t like what we are turning into’. This statement can bring recognition of tragedy, grief, and failure.

What makes people enemies? Often it is a story that may be an affront to dignity or prosperity. It is frequently a deep-lying insecurity that there is not enough to go around. In modern parlance FOMO. Fear of missing out. Sometimes it is ignorance or lack of information.

Even when all false stories have been exposed and competition over limited resources stilled and cultural misunderstanding addressed, there can still be perversity in the human heart: selfishness, cruelty, pride, and greed can still turn conflict into violence and war.

You can’t stop a conflict until you admit that you started one. Also overlooked is the fact that with deeper awareness of hurts inflicted both sides can still believe they are the innocent party.

A ceasefire is never the moment when parties believe that justice has been done. It doesn’t necessarily mean the abandonment of hatred, the lapse of grievance, or the end of anger.

What is necessary is acknowledgement that nothing else can start unless this stops. Like AA, the journey to wholeness comes when the person believes that they have allowed themself to become demeaned, disfigured and deranged by conflict. That they look to relief in **the true goods of existence**: love, joy, trust, togetherness, discovery, gentleness and kindness need not be set aside. Relief that a permanent state of tension may yield to a more relaxed rhythm of highs and lows, mundane moments and excitement. This feels like a statement of reality. Our lives are not black and white!

Ceasefire is a loss undergone for a greater yet deferred gain. Ceasefire may be a remarkable achievement is still an admission of failure form one or more parties. It isn’t a declaration of peace but it is the end of decent into purposeless war.

This explanation fits nicely with Jesus’ statement about being born of the Spirit. If we stay with the mind with ideas, we are grounded in the body. Flesh can only bring changes to flesh. If we want reconciliation, we must be born of the Spirit.

Tell a truthful Story Ch 3

Love keeps no score of wrongs. Hatred and enmity certainly do.

Story telling needs to go back as far as the surfacing of tension. There will be be mixed motives, exaggerated responses, hasty judgements, false assumptions, excessive demonization. In the words of Nelson Mandela Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies. The difference of power and status must be taken into account.

Until a truthful story of the circumstances of oppression have been told, until subjection is revealed and until the complicity of beneficiaries have been exposed reconciliation is premature.

Crimes and cruelties need to be exposed. Degradation and daily humiliation and suppression of protest must also be acknowledged.

The important step is to explain **without attempting to justify**. It may be that a sad story has to be told. Where there are deep-seated problems there is danger of replacing one form of oppression with another. Do you remember studying Orwell’s study Animal Farm? The animals rebelled against the farmer and the pigs took up his oppressive role.

Even when the whole of a truth is heard, this may not lead to justice. **There can be no reconciliation without justice.**

**Truth must lead to accountability.** Justice denotes a way of providing dispassionate assessment, rational evaluation and sober apportionment of responsibility. This is challenging. Who wants to hear that they have been involved in or complicit in bad behaviour?

So where does this new learning in relation to the journey to peace and mercy? Clearly, we need to reach out to the Holy Spirit for guidance and strength just as our gospel tells us. It is new birth by water and the Spirit that will set us on the road to healing.

Thanks be to God.

Reference

Wells, S. *Love Mercy* Canterbury Press 2020 passim.