

Deliverance
Good Friday
22 April 2011

Every now and then someone comes along whose thinking changes the way just about everyone else looks at the world over time. Such a person was the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant.

Kant radically revised the way people thought about religion with two powerful, and I think unhelpful ideas.

First, he prioritised the kinds of thinking that are available to us. The best kind of thinking is logical, rational thinking, the kind we use in the scientific, technological way so as to make things happen in the world. Then there is metaphysical thinking, the way we think about being itself, and consider the deepest religious questions of life. This mattered much less in Kant's estimation, and should be kept out of public discourse and major intellectual discussion. The metaphysical realm belonged to the world of private opinion and speculation, which is where religion itself should stay. Inasmuch as religion has anything at all to say it should be about how to be ethical.

This concern for the ethical led Kant to venture an opinion about one of the most important Christian doctrines in circulation – that centrepiece of Holy Week preaching, that Christ died for our sins. This he declared is a moral enormity.

We now live in the world that Kant has bequeathed to us. Religion stays out of public life, except for odd occasions like royal weddings. It is what a minority get up to in their spare time when they can indulge themselves with odd rituals and cranky opinions. Even more interesting is the way Kant's view of the atonement has seeped in to Christianity itself – so much so that preachers on the liberal wing of Christianity will be falling over themselves today to make their way around Kant's claim that it is a moral enormity to believe that Christ died for our sins.

This then is the major challenge facing any preacher who is at all alive to the intellectual currents that shape our world and control our automatic habits of thought, particularly if they want to maintain that God in Christ achieved something on the cross that changes the moral balance of the world. That is the challenge I set myself this afternoon, and let me begin by admitting the point at which I think that Kant had a legitimate gripe with the way some Christians presented the death of Christ.

I think that it is morally offensive to claim that Christ died to placate the angry and affronted feelings of God the Father towards human sinfulness. This theme of punishment, the punishment that was due

to us for our sinfulness, that Jesus stepped in to the breach to cop on our behalf, is very tricky indeed. It is what lies behind the doctrine of penal substitution, with its legal images and courtroom metaphors that stress the way Jesus went to execution in our place when it should have been us on death row.

What kind of a God wants this kind of a blood sacrifice we are left asking? What kind of a God permits and encourages his son to be done to death in this terrible way just so that he can feel better about the human race? Most reasonable and morally sensitive people reject this kind of a God. That doesn't stop street preachers continuing to present this kind of a God to the public, which I think is very unhelpful since it reinforces a caricature version of Christianity which many think they can easily write off.

There is a kind of an echo in some heroic acts of sacrifice to this way of looking at the atonement. Take for instance the death of the Polish Catholic priest Maximilian Kolbe in a Nazi death camp, when he took the place of someone else who had been picked for death by starvation as a reprisal for a successful escape. We can all understand what that act of substitution amounts to. But God is not like the commandant of a death camp – he operates on a rather more ethical plane.

We must reckon that God is the friend of the human race, not its enemy. We are the ones at enmity with him, who need to be reconciled to him. God doesn't change in his intentions towards us. The death of Jesus on the cross didn't change his mind about what he was going to do about us. We are the ones who need the change of heart.

The problem at the heart of this Divine human reconciliation process lies on our side of the line, and it relates to the consequences of human moral failure and rebellion against God. A helpful way of thinking about this is to consider what has been done in South African and in New Zealand to morally rebalance great historical injustices of the past.

In South Africa they came to the political decision that it would be just about impossible to punish everybody who had co-operated with the Apartheid regime, and would probably cause a white flight from the country. So they set up the truth and reconciliation commission that brought perpetrators before it, that established the truth of what had happened, and that named and shamed those who had committed these acts. The hope was that the perpetrators would repent, the done to black majority would forgive them, and that South African society would unite around this rebalancing of the books.

In New Zealand we have used a reparations process to try and redress the large land confiscations that took place at the end of the New Zealand wars. A commission looks in to these past injustices, rules on the truth of what happened, and awards grants of land and money, and often gets the government to make public apologies to Maori, as a way of trying to make amends for the past.

Note the common pattern here, establishing the truth, admitting the wrong, and making some costly sacrifice to put things right. The same pattern goes on in countless acts of human magnanimous reconciliation in human affairs all the time.

For many years I resisted the notion of being inherently sinful, or of being implicated in some past human rebellion against God, or in the past collective guilt of the human race. I just didn't feel that way about my life, and couldn't see why I should be blamed for what others had done way back in the past. But as the years have rolled by, and some faint glimmerings of Christian maturity have begun to emerge, together with an awareness of the superficiality with which I often lived the Christian life, a different perspective has begun to emerge. As I look back on past actions and motives with a sharpened sense of conscience I am less inclined to give myself the all clear for what seemed acceptable at the time. And, at the same time, I often become aware of how less than wonderful actions and utterances were often shaped by intangibles floating around from family, social and cultural influences. Yes I am implicated and influenced by the collective moral failure of humankind.

This is one of the realities that must be dealt with if our relationship with God is to come back on an even keel, to have even a reasonable chance of getting under way. In order to be able to have a life with God we must be set free from certain powerful realities, what Christianity loosely describes as the powers of darkness. It's a phrase that we often shy away from. We think it relates to characters in horror movies, or primitive tribal peoples who are in to juju and witch doctors.

But that is a naïve view of the world. The powers of darkness are alive and active among us. The economic catastrophe that overtook the world in 2008 was caused by systemic greed, stupidity and complicated, calculating cupidity in the banking world. And there were plenty of silly short sighted people out there in the real estate market who were prepared to take out loans they had little chance of repaying. And the dark underbelly of violent racist Christchurch is often reported in the court section of the Press.

I have called this sermon deliverance. There are plenty of things that we need deliverance from, and that is what Jesus set out to do on the cross. From there he drew the powers of darkness on to himself, drew

them in to himself, and in his saving death drew their fangs. He as it were de-potentialized the powers of darkness – he robbed them of their ultimate power over the human race. They could not now prevail in the long run in human affairs.

But here you will want to object – haven't you noticed that the powers of darkness are alive and active among us, doing splendidly well in fact in a number of places in the world. How can you say that the death of Jesus de-potentialized and delivered us from these regnant realities?

That happens at two levels. The devil, old nick, whatever you want to call him, realising that the game is up in the long run, is trying to tighten his grip on the human race in a last desperate, and ultimately futile, attempt to hold on to his domain. He is like a dictator who is facing rebellions everywhere, and who is lashing out right left and centre with cruel repression to try and stay in power at all costs. The Scriptures make it clear that towards the end there will be a rising crescendo of conflict between the principalities and powers of good and evil as they work themselves out in human affairs. It is like the no win situation the Third Reich faced in 1944 as the allies pressed in on its frontiers from France and Russia. There is still much suffering ahead, but final victory is not in doubt.

Then lastly we have to opt in to the saving consequences of Jesus' death on the cross. Maybe he has morally and spiritually rebalanced the universe, but that doesn't mean that we just receive the fruits of all that with the rations, as it were. "Yes I want to be delivered from the powers of darkness," we must say, "and I want you to rule in my life so that they can never come back again and hold sway over my heart and mind." In a sense God has won in what he achieved on the cross come what may, whatever human beings do or don't do about it, but it is a part of his loving kindness towards us that he wants us to opt in to this victory in the heavens.