

Now, it would be anachronistic to say that John the Baptist was in the wilderness of Judea in order to save it: no, he's there in order to call the people from the towns and villages of Judea, especially Jerusalem, in order to save them but it's significant that he goes out to the margins of society in order to address the centre. His cry is as one of the poor *to* the poor, but his target is also those of his people who have abused their God-given duty towards the poor: the Scribes and Pharisees and priests and Levites who have interpreted their faith in other ways and become oppressors of the poor, of their people, rather than liberators. This is not a new dynamic. It is the call of the prophets throughout Israel's history. We hear it in the reading from Isaiah today:

*He has sent me to bring good news to the poor,
to bind up hearts that are broken
to proclaim liberty to captives
freedom to those in prison
to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.*

Words which Jesus will later use of himself and echoed in both Zechariah's Benedictus and Mary's Magnificat. So concern for 'the poor' is not an optional extra which the rich, that is us, can exercise in order to improve our chances of heaven but at the very heart of why Jesus came. This is Christianity as essentially eccentric because God's love for us is essentially eccentric. It comes to us from the margins and, in a sense, has to if it's to be truly universal.

When we colonised New Zealand (I include myself here as a coloniser) we saw it as a Christian duty, not only to give its indigenous people the Bible, but to take their land in exchange, as Desmond Tutu once said of Christianity's role in Africa. And this – surprise! surprise! – was met with some resistance: indeed, in one incident in 1872, a party of government soldiers at Waikato found themselves without food and in danger of imminent attack. As they awaited their fate several large canoes appeared loaded with goats and potatoes. Their Maori 'attackers' explained themselves as follows:

The Book (the Bible) says, 'If thine enemy hunger, feed him.' You are our enemies. We feed you. That is all.

Now one can gloss this in several ways but I would like to use it to reinforce last week's words that other people's fate is our fate also; that no one's fate is exclusive of our own; that if we wish to save the planet, for example, we have to save the poor and what John the Baptist represents here, and Jesus, of course, even more so, is this dynamic in action. The whole meaning of Israel is *as* a marginalised people: it's from there that God reaches out to all. John's baptism in the Jordan is deeply symbolic of this call from the margins to the centre. Indeed, it's a direct challenge to the ministry of the priests and Levites, and religious authorities generally, in Jerusalem. And they come out like bees from the hive when their ministry, their authority, is challenged. Some will get it and be converted, will repent of their egocentric ways, but many will not. They have invested too much of themselves in the religious structures of the day. And this can be true of us, too. Contemplatives largely wait for those on the margins to come to them. Be glad when they do.

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