

Yet more glorious!

The further I go on this journey of exploration, the more excited I get about the way God works in this world, and I'm finding that the same principle works in situation after situation (and I'm not talking about so-called 'right' and 'wrong'). I shouldn't be surprised, of course, because God, as Creator, knows how things actually **work**. I'm writing now because yet another penny has just dropped for me, which applies this principle more and more widely.

I've been trying, as my Lent exercise, to read something spiritual every day, and yesterday I tried (for the third time!) to read a book that someone had recommended, but it was so booring! In desperation, I decided to look on the internet, and because Derek Flood's 'Healing the Gospel' has provided me with so much helpful material lately, I googled his name and found a 20 min video talk he did in 2014.

While I wouldn't altogether recommend the video (I thought he was too negative about penal substitution), it did shake me enough to enable another penny to drop into place. He was talking about applying Jesus' principle of **enemy love**, and was showing how it could be applied within the penal justice system. I was looking for something a bit more obviously 'spiritual', but I thought I'd listen anyway, and I'm really glad I did!

I'll start with the particular, and then try to show how, I believe, it applies universally.

The criminal justice system is predicated mainly on the idea of punishment (hence the term '**penal** justice'): to survive in prison, men have to face violence, so they learn to 'stand up for themselves' and thus become 'better' criminals as a result. However, Flood quoted the results of a 'restorative justice' programme that had been set up to enable serious offenders to cope with their negative emotions by providing them with alternative strategies for overcoming those feelings, thus enabling them to relate better to people around them. This has resulted in a **massive** reduction in reoffending.

So why has restorative justice not been taken up more widely? Well, it's much 'easier' just to decide what's right and wrong and then 'apply' it by force; that can be physical, emotional or societal force. But this does not just apply to the penal justice system but also to society in general, and even to international politics. We decide what's right and wrong and then ensure that people/countries 'do what's right' by sanctions, militarism, laws upon laws upon rules upon guidelines. But that way of organising society has many, many problems, most notably 'who decides what's right?' And we all know how fraught that can be.

One big problem is that politicians love to decide what's 'right' but then, by definition, what the other side says is **wrong**, so this leads to greater and greater polarisation, with each side demonising the other. The effect is that if the opposition comes up with a half-way workable solution, those in power almost **have** to reject it 'on principle', because admitting that their opponents have had a good idea is a definite no-no.

Anyway, to get back to being positive, it's this same principle of restorative justice (enemy love) that I've been discovering on a spiritual basis through my journey. While the penal substitution theory of Jesus' cross is predicated on the model of crime and punishment, I've come to believe that what really matters to God is not 'right and wrong' (sins), but restoring relationships –

relationships with God and with one another: 'Love the Lord your God ... and love your neighbour ...' as someone once said!

And what I've been realising is that restorative justice is also the principle behind what several erudite people such as Eisenstein and Jordan Peterson have realised: it's not about what's right and what's wrong, *per se*, rather it's about how we can get a workable solution and a practical solution that minimises damage, e.g. Eisenstein's 'abundance and gift' to replace 'accumulation and scarcity'. There are enough resources in the world if we could just learn to share, rather than insisting on our 'rights'.

The massive irony and great sadness to me is that while Jesus taught his followers about the principle of restorative justice some 2000 years ago (echoing what God had told the Israelites even longer ago), more recently, Christians have come up with a 'better' solution: personal salvation. *We are taught that* the really important thing is that is each of us, as individuals, have to 'get saved' and then we can get stuck in to society and sort out the mess.

And how should we sort out the mess? *We are taught that*, as Christians, we know what's 'right', because the Bible tells us what's right! So we see being 'salt and light' as going around telling other people what's right (and maybe even **making** them do what's right).

How could we have perverted Jesus' teaching to such a massive extent?! Do you see what we've done? We've allowed our faith to follow the same pattern of working out right and wrong and then enforcing right by punishing wrong.

So we've modelled our faith on the principle of crime and punishment: God tells us what's right; we transgress the laws; so we deserve to be punished by God; but we can escape punishment if we know the key, which is to believe in Jesus' death as a means to get a free pardon.

No, sorry, that's **not** God's principle; God wants to **restore** relationships, to heal us. What Jesus came to model was **enemy love**, and although that principle – restorative justice – is not easy, it actually **works**, as the non-violent protests of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, among others, have shown – their enemy love exposed the evils within the system that sought to dominate them.

We haven't got time or space (or in my case the expertise), but we could apply restorative justice to Brexit, to Northern Ireland, to the Middle East, to global warming, to sustainability, to ... you name it.

I believe that God's plan was that Christians should **demonstrate** enemy love, restorative justice, but we replaced kingdom, covenant, community and relationship with personal salvation. God forgive us and please help us to get back to being the kind of salt and light that Jesus intended.

Lord, let it be!

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