

## 2016 Good Friday Meditation by Gord Wilson

IT IS FINISHED...

So what was the work that Jesus came to do? WHAT was finished? How would we characterize Jesus' message and ministry?

The immediate context of Jesus' ministry took place against the backdrop of Roman imperial order in Palestine. The people whom Jesus knew, and grew up with, lived on the fringes of the empire – not in the geographical sense – but as part of the vast, marginal majority who lived permanently beyond the reach of Rome's promises that it could provide prosperity and hope. To these men, women, and children, Rome's promises were empty ones. Certainly the high-priestly and Herodian families appointed in Palestine by the Romans enjoyed power and privilege, but a great gulf existed between these rulers and the bulk of the population of marginal peasants living in villages.

Under the pressure of Herod's taxation and land dispossession, Roman legal standards rather than the Torah began to replace the social codes and standards of community behaviour ingrained in the Mosaic law. Villagers who would previously have felt a responsibility to help their neighbours in times of shortage were no longer under legal obligation to do so, especially since they were themselves now debtors hard-pressed to feed their own children. The normal flow of wealth, power, and privilege in Judea and Galilee under the Roman Empire was upwards, built upon pyramids of peasant sacrifice.

As modern western Christians, we have tended to read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry as a paradigmatic story of Christian discipleship. And we think of Jesus as having dealt mainly with

other individuals in his preaching and practice. Jesus was preaching a spiritual kingdom, calling individuals to repentance, this traditional theological view suggested.

But there was no such assumption in Jesus' time about the separation of religion from political and economic affairs. The notion that spiritual renewal was something separate from social, political, and economic renewal would have been incomprehensible. That Christ's kingdom was not of this world (as John states in chapter 18) was understood as a statement of its *origin*: the kingdom is not *of* the world, but it is *in* the world, and deeply concerned with it. Israel's very origins lay in God's liberation of their bondage to the Pharaoh in Egypt, celebrated annually in Passover, and continuing through the covenant as a sort of social contract that would enable the people to maintain just social-economic relations in their exclusive loyalty to their God.

The coming of God's reign was the controlling idea and central conviction of Jesus' ministry, and involved revitalizing these traditional Mosaic covenantal principles of communal mutuality and justice. Jesus is portrayed in the Gospel of Mark as boldly pronouncing God's condemnation of the rulers and their representatives *to their face, and in public*. Jesus' miracles, healings, exorcisms, and teachings were intuitively understood by the Jewish populace as an open resistance to oppressive Roman rule, and offered hope for transformation of villages which had become badly fragmented communities of alienated, frightened individuals. Thus, in the Lord's Prayer, the Kingdom of God meant sufficient food for hungry people and cancellation of debts. It was associated with the overcoming of despair, despondency, and disease. The Kingdom of God had remarkably concrete economic, social, and political implications.

It is only when we arrive in Modernity that we encounter an understanding of faith (or 'religion') which has no social, economic, political, or ethical dimensions except inasmuch as

they are a matter of individual concern. How did this view come to be so dominant and resilient, even in the Church today?

The answer to this question probably lies in the one meaning of secularization that almost everyone in the West celebrates – namely, the creation of a system that supposedly allows for religious freedom and conflict-free religious pluralism by privatizing religion and creating a religiously neutral state apparatus that deals with the issues of the common good -- without reference to the irrational passions and beliefs of the pious. Freedom *of* religion, it is alleged, protects society *from* religion.

Controlling the churches by granting individual freedom of religion created institutional structures that left ‘the world’ to itself, and reinforced a perception of religion as subjective and arbitrary. While “the Great Separation”, as it has been called, is widely regarded as having been a great success, it becomes increasingly clear that the modern concept of religion as a matter of private belief is itself an ideological proposal. The term ‘religion’ is problematic because it identifies certain kinds of belief as inherently different and less rational than other kinds of belief, such as faith in the market or the nation. But it fails to make much sense of the human experience of the sacred as connected to the whole of life...

Nonetheless, faith defined as ‘private’ and ‘individual’ has had a great impact on our theological self-understanding. New generations of modern Christian leaders accepted and creatively adapted these main elements of the dominant ideology to their own spiritual ends. But the outcome has been a shift away from the centrality of the Kingdom of God we see in Jesus’ ministry – with what one NT scholar terms “self-protective and accommodationist” results.

A personal confession of faith fits neatly onto faith defined as ‘private’ and ‘individual’. Not only is salvation understood as involving a personal decision, but we also tend to think of “sin” in terms of an individual’s transgressions. We do not typically think of our participation in social and economic structures which oppress others and damage Creation as “sin”. If it is not something which involves intentionality, and therefore over which we can exercise some measure of control, then it does not fit into the category of “sin”. St. Paul’s lament (in Romans 7) that he ‘does not do what he wants, but does the very thing that he hates’ could, however, just as readily be adapted to fit within a non-individualistic, non-privatized understanding of sin which does justice to our own experience of being inextricably embedded in society’s sinful structures and practices.

This individualistic tailoring of such basic theological categories as ‘sin’ and ‘salvation’ to fit into a modernist agenda, combined with the gradual exclusion of the church from public life, has also had the result of back-loading the spiritual burden onto the individual. A group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a mere collection of individuals; but when that group interprets itself in individualistic terms, then the corporate body is inevitably undermined. Regardless of how much we, as individual Christians, undertake our faith development as a ‘celebration of discipline’, we are unable to achieve the full-bodied-ness which would attend participation in a church which did not itself live a truncated existence.

Let me attempt to illustrate this further. The saturation of contemporary culture with advertising, for example, is a concern shared by many Christians. It is rightly recognized as often coercive and manipulative. Perhaps the most intensely targeted demographic in marketing today is the pre-school audience – the future consumer. MacDonald’s, Disney....we all know the brands. Although the child may not be in a position to exercise its preferences for

many years, it pays to cultivate the demographics' sensibilities as they are formed. We recognize that branding is a rigorously controlled one-way message, sent out in its glossiest form, with implicit liturgies of meaning and promise which rival the church's liturgy for our children's bodies and minds. It makes many of us acutely aware of our powerlessness, and understandably anxious as a result. Advertising has unmistakably religious dimensions. We do not believe, for example, that avarice can be redefined as benign self-interest. Nor do we believe that self-worth is determined by what we own. But the church, as an institution, is excluded from turning the corporate social monologue into a social dialogue. And the proliferation and intrusiveness of marketing, combined with the solitariness of the individual, makes it nearly impossible to resist being absorbed by the ethos of the market.

This accommodation to the construal of religion interpreted narrowly and interiorly, then, has brought unanticipated costs. The space left by the removal of the Church has resulted in a symbiosis of capitalism and consumerism upon which individual Christians have little or no impact. Removed from the public square, Christianity is at risk of becoming diluted culturally to an "interpersonal niceness", with personal Christianity just one more DIY therapeutic option open to consumers in the marketplace of available spiritualities. Without the voice of the church in the public square, it becomes a lifestyle choice, not an ethical response. Indeed, the all-consuming maw of the market is more than happy to offer a benign acceptance of one more spiritual flavour provided it does not question or threaten the sacred status of the market itself. There is, in fact, a certain resemblance between the patronage pyramids that structured economic relations in the Roman Empire and the corporate pyramids of conglomerate multinational corporations. The state's *new* partner is an all-pervasive consumerism wedded to a staunch faith in market capitalism. Indeed, governments now often do the bidding of huge

corporations, as the power relations between government and the globalized economic power of capital have been reversed. But the place of the institutional Church remains one which excludes it from playing anything but a charitable role in issues of social and economic disenfranchisement.

If we believe that the task of the church is to proclaim that in Jesus salvation has been fulfilled, and to embody that salvation for the world, accepting the privatization of the church is problematic. For the church to fulfill its vocation as a community means challenging 'Caesar' and resisting the values of the marketplace. If we anticipate justice, then let us live justly. For the values and priorities of God's dominion are believed only so far as they are enacted.

But challenging the very conceptual spaces and categories of contemporary life is also problematic. It is subversive – and subversive ideas that threaten seemingly foundational assumptions are just as likely to be welcomed now as they were in Jesus' time under imperial Rome. That is to say, not at all. And few, if any, of us have a desire to be martyrs...

So like the early Christians, we live quietly in the shadow of an empire, accepting that the church has been institutionally excluded and ideologically denounced. As Reason and Science have become the guides of societal life, the church has settled into its confinement to the religious sphere. So where do we go from here?

The answer to that question, I think, begins with the modest effort to make the line that divides modern categories of understanding and domination more permeable. Many Christians have already dismissed the theological paradigm which accepts the premise that Jesus and the Gospels, like the rest of the Bible, are required to be religious and spiritual, separated from the real-world life of politics and economics. We need to extend this further to include the many other either/or categories with which modernity operates: Public/private, reason/faith, secular/sacred, objective/subjective, facts/feelings, science/art,

outer/inner, male/female...the list is varied and long. But one thing becomes very apparent when they are arranged in a column – the empowered sit on one side, and the disempowered on the other. Making the line that divides these categories more permeable, relativizing the left side in terms of the right, would permit us to begin “thinking differently” and thus living differently.

The notion that “it is finished...” and the Kingdom of God has somehow arrived seems counter-intuitive to anyone who watches the evening news. Indeed, Dickens’ famous opening line, “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times” would seem to have a more obvious resonance with our experience of the world. Much of that confusion, however, can be clarified by recognizing that neither Jesus nor the NT authors understood this kingdom of God so much as a *place* as an entire dynamic *event* of God coming to rule.

The phrase “it is finished” is an expression of God’s dominion or universal rule. In and through Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, God has been victorious over the powers of evil and death. The work of Christ is already accomplished, and is available here and now. Yet essential change is also to come in the future. That is why Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God as both future and yet already present. Such eschatological beliefs are at heart theological affirmations, claims about the nature and purpose of God. With respect to the life of discipleship, *both individual and institutional*, the cross stands for a work in progress. It is an eschatology both realized and future. “It is finished”... but we are not done yet. Amen.