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The Other Side Of 1990

(89os90)

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Unpublished

A presentation at Clare College, Cambridge University. No date given, but likely 1989. Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and Hebrews 11:29-12:2 were the given texts.

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You can't tell who you are without telling your story. You can't tell your story without telling the story of your people. And you can't tell the story of your people apart from the wider story of which it is a part – the story of your nation, the civilization which has made you what you are. The answer to the question 'Who am I?' leads into the whole story of which I am a part.

The whole story? Do we need to go so far, or is it enough only to know the story of our kind of people? Apparently not, for there are courses in world history in our schools and Universities. But on what principles are these courses constructed? History can be told by sifting out of the billions of things which have happened, the things which are significant. But significant for what? Presumably, for the point of the story. You cannot tell the story unless you have some idea of what the point of the story is. The world history I learned as a student presumed that the point of the story was the growth and development of our kind of civilization. So the key points were Greek science and philosophy, Roman law, the recovery of classical learning at the Renaissance, the rise of modern science, the industrial revolution and the imperial expansion of the European powers. It was a different story from the one the Israelite farmer told, or the one the letter to the Hebrews tells.

The point of the story as I learned it at school is that it has produced people like us. If human life is the result of the survival of the fittest in the struggle among the random mutations which the life-process throws up, then, since we have survived, we are clearly the fittest. We are the point of the story.

But, of course, other people are also writing world history. I used to teach in a High School in an Indian country town. While the British Raj was still in place, there were text books which told the story from the same sort of view-point that I had at school. After Indian independence in 1947 all those textbooks had to be thrown away and a new set of text-books written. The story had a different point. And if you are teaching in Zimbabwe or Papua New Guinea it will be different again. So, can there be an account of world-history which everyone can

accept and own? Or, to put the question another way, can we tell the human story in such a way that when we are asked 'Who are you?' we can say 'I am a human being' before I go on to say 'I am an Englishman or a Ugandan'? Is the human story, in any sense, one story with a meaning we can all share? That's a serious question for human survival.

I have a Hindu friend with whom I have been carrying on discussions for the past 20 years or so. He has a brilliant mind and is deeply versed in the religious literature of India, and in the Bible. He has several times said to me; 'Why do Christians so constantly misrepresent your Bible? You have brought it to us as if it were one more book of religion. We have plenty of those in India and we don't need another. But as I read your Bible I find it to be a quite unique interpretation of universal history, of cosmic and human history, and therefore a quite unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. I think he is right. The Bible is a collection of many different kinds of writing, but if you take it as a whole it is an interpretation of universal history from the creation of the world to its consummation, and of the human race from the birth of all the nations to the vision of the final goal of human civilization – a city of unimaginable splendour with gates open on every side and all the nations streaming into it with all their different treasures. Theological students, unfortunately, are asked to spend so much time analyzing and dissecting the various strands which make it up that they often miss the shape of the whole. It is like trying to understand a photograph in the morning paper by taking a magnifying glass to it. You see only a lot of black dots; you don't see the picture.

How does the picture look if you stand back and look at the whole?

Like any good story it has a hero, and the hero goes through tremendous battles before the victory is won. The hero, of course, is God – God whom no one has ever seen but who is the hidden power behind all that exists; God who has created a universe of matchless splendour and brought forth the vast multitude of living creatures; who has brought forth a human family to live in his love and enjoy his glory. It is also the story of that family's constant refusal of his invitation, its sullen unbelief, its murderous pride, its chasing after fantasies of power and glory which only lead to the pit. It is the story of God's choosing one of the families, the family of Abraham, to be entrusted with the secret of his purpose on behalf of all, one company to be the nucleus of a restored human family. It is the story of the constant misunderstanding of that calling. Those chosen to bear the secret thought that they were God's favourites, specially privileged, destined to rule the world. They had to learn by bitter suffering that love's victory is only through suffering. The Crux, the turning point of the whole story, comes when the whole secret of God's purpose is embodied in one man and that man hangs nailed to a wooden cross. That is the point where one might expect that God would abandon the whole disastrous enterprise. What future is there after this? The suicide of Judas is the first commentary on what happened that Friday.

But the story does not end there. The resources of divine love are not exhausted. In a mighty act which has only one parallel, namely the creation of the universe itself, God raised Jesus from the dead. The divine enterprise is re-affirmed. A new creation begins within the life of the old. Once again the secret is entrusted to a few for the sake of the many. The secret of the divine purpose is now available for all. God's victory will be won not by the power of empires but by the blood of Jesus and of those who follow Jesus on the way of the cross. Those who bear the secret go their way into all the nations until the nations come to find their true life in the dying of him who is the giver of all life. At the end of the story we have the vision of a city of supreme splendour; not a return to the garden but the gathering into a city whose gates are open on every side so that all the nations may stream into it. The joy of journey's end is simply that they see their Lord face to face and live in the light of his love.

That is the true human story. That is the real world history. Not the rise and fall of Babylon and Assyria, of Greece and Rome, and of the British Empire or of the science and technology by which we seek to dominate the world. That is the real story, and therefore it defines my story. It tells me who I am and where I am to look for meaning and direction. But, of course, it is not what is taught in classes on world history in India, or Zimbabwe, or England. It used to be

taught but not now. It used to be taught – at least in Scotland – as the first thing a child needs to know: that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever. They had the odd belief that when you start on a journey you need to know the destination. But you can't teach that now. That would be indoctrination. You can teach a theory of human origins but not of human destiny. And since you can't tell the human story except by picking out from the vast mass of happening the things which you think are significant; and since you can't tell what is significant unless you know the point of the story; and since we can't wait till the end of history to see whether the story has any point at all, it might be worth considering the Bible as an interpretation of the story which is based on the faith that the point of the story has already been made in those events which happened on that Friday and that Sunday outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Now, of course, I know that this story is told in schools and Universities. It is taught in a separate slot called RE, or a separate department called Theology. But what goes on in there is not allowed to interfere with the syllabus on world history. It doesn't belong to the world of facts, but to the world of beliefs and values. It's about what we call 'religious experience'. But we have no way of making contact with any kind of reality except through experience. The question is experience of what? A couple of centuries ago the RE teacher would have said 'God spoke to Moses'. That was a fact. Now, especially if she has had a theological education, she will probably say 'Moses had a religious experience'. But when an astronomer first sights a new comet, he doesn't say, 'I've had an astronomical experience'. Of course he has, but he doesn't say it that way. He says 'There is a new comet'. Why the difference? In both cases there is a human experience. In both cases the experience is understood to convey truth about a reality beyond the self. That understanding is only possible because both Moses and the astronomer have been nurtured in a certain tradition: Moses in a religious tradition, the astronomer in a scientific one. A child with no scientific training who looked through the telescope would have the same experience of stimulation of the retina but would not have understood that there was a new comet. You could say that all understanding of reality is through experience interpreted by means of a tradition. A tradition is maintained only when there are people who have faith in its validity and so continue to keep it alive by continually seeking to cope with new situations from within the traditions, and who are always modifying and developing the tradition in the light of new experience. Whether we are talking about Moses or the astronomer, the question is whether or not we are gaining a true understanding of the real world beyond ourselves.

The Israelite farmer, and the writer to the Hebrews, and we here in this chapel, stand within a tradition which seeks a true understanding of the human story as a whole through a particular history of interpreted happenings which have their centre in the events concerning Jesus of Nazareth. It is a particular history. It is about happenings in western Asia and not in Japan or Peru. It is embodied in particular languages – Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek – not in Sanskrit or Persian. There are other traditions and other languages: why this particular one? But why not? Every tradition of understanding is a specific tradition embodied in a specific language. We don't have a God's-eye view which would enable us to look down on all these traditions and judge them by some transcendent criterion. In the so-called Age of Reason many Europeans did in effect believe this. They contrasted what they called the universal truths of reason with the accidental happenings of history. But when we, from two centuries later, look back on these universal truths of reason we find that they were in fact very much rooted in a particular tradition of thought and speech. There is no way of seeing things except from where we stand. What is more, we don't choose that place. We are put there. We are born and grow up using a particular language and becoming part of a particular tradition, or perhaps several traditions. If a tradition is to live and grow it must be open to learn from other traditions, but there is no way of learning anything except by using a language which embodies a tradition, a particular language, a particular tradition. The only kind of universal language is one that nobody uses – like Esperanto.

I said that we stand in the same tradition as the Israelite farmer and the writer to the Hebrews. But we also stand in another tradition, another way of understanding the total human situation, the way I learned in the world-history class at school. It is a way of understanding the

human story as a process which culminates in the production of our kind of civilization. For a century or so we believed it so thoroughly that we exported it to the rest of the world, and now the rest of the world, in what is called 'modernization', is not only accepting it but beating us at our own game. However, a great many people in what we call the 'developed' world have become very unsure. If the whole point of the story is that it produces people like us, is it worth it? We don't behave as if we thought there was anything worth looking forward to on the other side of 1990. As a nation we do not behave as if we were looking forward to a just, free and caring society for our children and grandchildren. We seem to want to make as much money as we can, to spend it as quickly as possible, in the most conspicuous way possible. Our Western tradition is running out of credibility.

But God who chose Abraham and Moses and Isaiah to be bearers of his secret has – odd as it may seem – chosen us who are by baptism members in the body of Christ, to live and think and plan and work and eventually die in that tradition which the writer to the Hebrews celebrates in the passage we read. We are called to be the company which lives the story which is the true story, and therefore to be signs and instruments of the true end to which the story moves. The clue to the whole story, and we cannot say this too often, is in those events concerning Jesus of Nazareth which are the focus of our faith. We are authentic bearers of the secret, and therefore authentic signs of the goal, when we follow Jesus on the way he went. It is the way in which he taught and which he enacted. That means, most of the time, not going with the current but against it. It means being with him in challenging all the powers that destroy our true humanity, bearing the cost of the challenge, and finding in him the secret of new creation. It means being total sceptics in respect of most of the scenarios which are on offer for the future. There is a cleansing, antiseptic quality in authentic Christian worship and discipleship which eliminates a whole world of poisonous fantasy. It means that our horizon is not 1990, or 2000, or some fantasy world beyond that. Our horizon is that vision with which the Bible ends, of the holy city adorned as a bride for her husband. That is the only real future, and that governs everything we do and think and hope for now. That is the company we belong to, the men and women of faith in all ages who endured as seeing him who is invisible. That is the real story; that is who we are and where we belong.

So, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with patience the race for which we are entered, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of faith, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be all praise and glory.

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