

Violence, Principalities and Powers November 4 2006, Auckland

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It is my understanding that we gather today as part of the continuing commitment to the decade to overcome violence, and I am grateful to the Diocesan Social Justice Council and the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship for making this opportunity available to us, and for inviting me to speak.

One of the major problems facing anyone engaging with violence in the current age is the enormity and pervasiveness of violence itself. Violence has always been global, structural and pervasive – it's simply that these days we are more acutely aware of its tendrils. At its worst, this enormity nourishes in us a feeling of being incapacitated or ineffective, and in order to try and respond and make sense of nonsense, we often desire more earnestly to understand the problem and its solution.

Certainly the title of today's symposium conveys that sense of enormity and perhaps nourishes one or two of the same impulses in us. So, when we look at our times we are beguiled and bemused by the violence we see on such a massive scale, and we deploy all means at our disposal (including the media) to try and better 'understand' the situation.

The risk in doing this, of course, is that understanding replaces involvement as our principal mode of engagement. Information therefore replaces transformation. It is a beguiling characteristic of our age. This is a remarkably effective and negative tactic that allows violence to thrive and dissent to be 'accommodated' (and diluted) without it threatening the reign of violence in any way.

In the face of violence we have become disorientated, uninvolved, and disengaged. I suggest that the main reason for our disorientation, our lack of involvement, and our disengagement is not a lack of information, but our failure to take seriously the world in which we are located *right here and now*¹, and the reality in this world known biblically as the principalities and powers.

I'd like to explore this in the hopes that our biblical vision of reality and our gift of discernment may be nurtured a little. For it is the gift of discernment which allows us to live in the face of the death that so pervades our landscape. This will be, of course, the briefest of sketches. In order to enrich our thinking about

¹ This can be witnessed, for example, in the recent rise of interest in forms of religion and spirituality which promote an over emphasis upon the 'next life' rather than this world and this life.

the principalities and powers, at the end of my talk I want to play a 10 minute recording of Karl Barth talking about the principalities and powers in 1962.

Outline

American lawyer and theologian William Stringfellow recovered the biblical theology of the principalities and powers for post-war America, and his voice has been deeply influential although largely unacknowledged. He's been described by Rowan Williams as "the most significant Anglican lay theologian of the 20th century".

Stringfellow described the centrality of the bible to our faith, and its politics, rather succinctly.

The Bible is about the common life of people in the world as it is...the issue of what it means to be a human being in a fallen world...so that when we come to terms with the principalities and powers we have to come to terms with the meaning of the Gospel for all kinds of things...that beset and bewilder us...this is the realm in which the gospel addresses the problems of ecology, racism...technology, the state, due process of law...institution, ideology, nation...and all those strange hopes that people pursue, like nostalgia. William Stringfellow, *Ethics of Change*

He makes clear that the New Testament deals comprehensively with the P&P. If we chose to persist to neglect or omit this mystery, then there is a burden of proof on us with regards our selectivity of New Testament. If we omit them, about a quarter is left out – this is, he rightly surmises, "a distorting omission", but nevertheless one in which we have engaged for many years. The result is moral and political confusion, inaction, and paralysis – without an appreciation of the principalities and powers, our engagement fails.

Therefore, in neglecting the principalities and powers, as we have done in most of our theological and church life, we have deprived ourselves from both comprehending what is going on in the world, and being able to act in the real freedom given us through the gospel.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is addressed to situations like this. "It claims a peculiar insight into our affairs, and the relationships of us with each other and between us and all of creation." We should be clear about creation, of course, for creation is not simply another way of referring to nature. Certainly, creation includes nature. But as Stringfellow put it, "biblically speaking, in the OT and the NT 'creation' encompasses other creatures as well, and is more significantly a reference to the corporations rather than the cows."

We should probably unpack this a bit.

What are the principalities and powers?

The principalities and angelic powers are part of creation. They are an order of creation – creatures created by God for God's pleasure. Biblically speaking, in creation, they are a gift of God to humanity placed under our dominion. They are the "means through which men rejoice in the gift of life to all men and to the whole of creation...Everyone, all angels, and all things in creation have origination, integrity and wholeness of life in the worship of God" (Stringfellow).

In the fall, the principalities and powers are captive to the power of death; in the fall, they literally work to and for death, and in working for them we likewise, work ourselves to and for death. Therefore as we encounter them now, where the vestiges of death remain in the new creation that has not yet fully manifest, the fallen principalities challenge and reject the sovereignty of God claiming "sovereignty over human life and history" for themselves.

So, the problem isn't so much the principalities and powers, but their status as fallen and the way they demand our loyalty, service, worship and ultimately our hope. The work or service we offer in order to enhance the survival of some principality reveals how fragile a hope we have when all principalities and powers are subjected to the power of death. When placed in service of the principalities everything, even hope, is distorted by this power and dies. In our loyalty to them violence, as the embodiment of the power of death, holds sway.

When the bible refers to these fallen principalities and powers, it is referring to what Stringfellow names as images, institutions and ideologies. They exist now as they always have. It is our lack of awareness of them, or the seriousness with which we take them, that most confounds us when we seek to understand and engage a world shrouded in violence.

Biblically, they have many names: "dominions, thrones, princes, princes of this world, lords, gods, idols, angels, devils, spirits, elements, virtues (which as Stringfellow himself notes, is one of the more intriguing names), they are spoken of in assoc with Satan, Beelzebub, devil, power of death, and in images ref. appropriating creatures – lions, serpents, dragons etc." (Stringfellow)

Many words are used to describe their multiple reality and significances. Their multiple reality is beguiling. We are trapped or enticed by them; seduced by them such that we replace one ideology (say, communism) with another (say, capitalism), and believe we are now free while in fact we remain in slavery to a different master, or the same one with a different name.

We each of us live under the claim of many powers. Each one claims our loyalty, our service, our worship – in fact each makes essentially the same demands upon us as our God. That is, they implicitly and explicitly claim that idolatry of them is the only thing through which we will gain moral significance and purpose.

This is enslavement, and is, of course, dehumanising. When we subject ourselves to the authority of the principalities and powers we are slaves. It makes us sub-human, less human than we were created and re-created to be. As slaves we are robbed of our freedom; we live in service or bondage to a master, and it is that master, that false prophet, that Anti-Christ, and the relationship we have with it, which so distorts our true humanity. It is this that is at the root of violence.

Let's be clear, the principalities and powers are no mere archaic biblical metaphor or allegory for something we really call something else; they are created beings. Of all the fallen principalities, the church is perhaps the most obvious.

And so the question becomes, surely, what do they look like today, and what practical freedom do we have from them?

I'd like to look at these questions in turn.

What do they look like today?

Stringfellow really discovered the principalities and powers (or did they discover him – hunt him down, perhaps?) when he lived and worked in the late 1950s and early 60s in one of the poorest parts of NYC – East Harlem.² The residents of East Harlem taught him literally how to see things in a new way. It was this 'seeing reality differently' which brought reality sharply into focus, and allowed him to more profoundly comprehend the power of death and its reign in this world as a reality concerning social ethics and the structures which embody them.

As Stringfellow wrote, the principalities the powers are today embodied in institutions and structures, procedures and regimes, like the power company,

“or the Department of Welfare, the gangs or the police, the Housing Authority or the social work bureaucracy, the hospital system or the banks, liberal philanthropy or corporate real estate speculation. In the wisdom of the people of the East Harlem neighbourhood, such principalities are identified as demonic powers because of the relentless and ruthless dehumanisation which they cause. (Stringfellow, 1976c:5)96

As Ideologies, the principalities include the various “ism's” to which we pledge our political, economic or ethical allegiance, for example: capitalism, communism, pacifism, democracy, racism, fascism, nationalism, rationalism, free markets, globalisation. None of these, least of all the nation which embodies them, is the benevolent entity it is so often perceived as, and amidst

² Such was the overcrowding in East Harlem that if the entire population of the United States at that time lived in the same close proximity to each other then they could fit into a space the size New York City.

the era of threat and prosperity Stringfellow therefore warned in his own context that “Americans are now constantly, incessantly, and somewhat vehemently assailed with the word that the ultimate moral significance of their individual lives is embodied in and depends upon the mere survival of the American nation and its ‘way of life’” (Stringfellow). It is not so very different in our own country, nor perhaps on a global scale where democracy is heralded as the saviour of the world and the bringer of peace through the waging of war.

As Institutions the principalities make moral claims upon individuals for their commitment, whether “a great corporation, a government agency, an ecclesiastical organisation, a union, utility, or university” (Stringfellow) in order to ensure its own survival. The survival of the institution is the primary concern of the principality of the institution and that is the end to which all its work is focused. It is dehumanising work. Whilst often portrayed as benign, or even somehow to the benefit of the employee, “in the end, the claim for service which an institution makes upon a man is an invitation to surrender his life in order that the institution be preserved and prosper. It is an invitation to bondage” (Stringfellow). Institutions would include also social agencies, NGOs, the church.

As Images the principalities are broad in their scope, and most common. Whilst often traditionally displaying less influence than other principalities, we are each of us accompanied by one throughout our life. Most obviously these images can be associated with celebrity (whether an entertainer, actor, politician etc.), but each one of us conveys an image, and leaves an image — a public image — in the minds of those we meet both during our life and after it. Of course, celebrity makes such some images more widely known than others: Margaret Thatcher, Roger Douglas, Adolf Hitler, Karl Barth, Elvis Presley, Whina Cooper, Te Whiti O Rongomai, Marilyn Monroe, George Bush, David Beckham, Madonna, Osama Bin Laden.

Furthermore, image today is also portrayed strongly in advertising and branding, and the domination of image based communications. People’s images have become like the logos or flags they serve and promote. Therefore, in our culture the principality of image can be seen at work when we give up our own identity to the pursuit of an image, for example through fashion and brand acquisition, as much as in the idolisation of the image of particular people. The images on television do a great deal to nurture this behaviour. It is an idolatry which costs us our lives. “The demand. . . made in the conflict between the principality and the personality is one in which the whole life of the person is surrendered to the principality and is given over to the worship of the image” (Stringfellow).

Let us consider our own context.

Consider the corporation of the power companies, and their response to climate change: that increased costs associated with climate change would be passed directly onto the consumer. But what of the self-serving nature that goes un

addressed? Profit is essential for the corporation's survival, over and against the rest of creation, but is it essential for ours?

Or consider neo-liberal democracy, which demands conformity and obedience, and uses the language of freedom and power. Many have neither freedom nor power because they do not have the economic means to be valued participants in the system, or because they choose not to conform. We are all dehumanised in that process.

Or consider Iraq and the people of Iraq, or the rhetoric of the war on terror, or the Patriot Act.

In all of these examples everywhere, the moral manifestation of the principalities and powers in service to the power of Death is violence. It is 'we' not 'them' – we are all implicated. In the face of such an onslaught, what practically can we do? What practical freedom do we have?

Freedom in Christ

Our freedom from the principalities and powers is to be found both in the death and resurrection of Christ, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are the means of peace. The reality of creation is that Christ has dominion and we are literally free from the dominion of these powers.

Simply, our freedom from the powers is to be found in obedience to Christ. This is the freedom and ministry of the church. The ministry of the church is itself one of great extravagance – it is through this extravagance that the world may know God. As the body of Christ it necessitates the church live a life like His; an embodiment of the “reckless, scandalous, expenditure of His life for the sake of the world's life (Stringfellow). The church's life is not a prudential, cautious, conservative, or conventionally successful one. That is certainly the life of Religion. But the vocation of the church – the authenticity of the church free from the power of death – is to live for the world, where God is. The extravagance of the church means having freedom, unencumbered by its history, its politics, or its wealth. The Church of Christ is free from the dominion of death, in this world, just as it is.

Stringfellow relays a story of a clergyman from a wealthy local parish who rang to ask for advice. The clergyman told of a woman who had been evicted because she couldn't pay her rent and had grievances against her landlord. He seeks Stringfellow's counsel on how to proceed, and what their recourse in law might be. Stringfellow, who is running late to catch an aeroplane, answers promptly: “Well, sell one of your tapestries and pay the rent”. He then hung up, and caught the plane. During his flight Stringfellow tells us that he began to think he had been a bit rude, and resolved to ring him and apologise. By the time the plane has landed, however, he had rejected this notion, and is once again firm in his resolve. The freedom of the church, he says, is precisely that freedom to sell one of its tapestries to pay the rent, whether or not the person

has a just cause. That is the extravagance of the gospel, and of the church.

If they have that freedom, then. . . does the tapestry have religious significance. . . The tapestry is an authentically Christian symbol only when it represents the freedom in Christ to give up any aspect of the inherited and present life of the institutional church, including, but not limited to, possessions, for the sake of the world. . . Mission is itself the only charity which Christians have to offer the poor, the only work which Christians have to do. . . When the Church has the freedom itself to be poor among the poor, it will know how to use what riches it has. When the Church has that freedom, it will know how to minister among the rich and powerful. When the Church has that freedom, it will be a missionary people again in all the world. (Stringfellow)

It is through Jesus Christ that we have this freedom – we stand, as Barth will remind us shortly, looking back at his first coming, and forward to his last coming, and we look upon his presence here with us, in the common life of the world where we are. Looking to him means to be filled with the Spirit which sustains us in our hope, and requires us to embrace the gifts of the Spirit as the political and transformative gifts that they are. As Barth puts it, this is the freedom we have: to stand and to fight these ghosts, and that’s what we need. Stringfellow, likewise, suggests “resistance to the power of death is the only way to live humanly.”

The Bible makes a political statement of the reign of Christ preempting all the rulers, and all pretenders to thrones and dominions, subjecting incumbents and revolutionaries, surpassing the doctrines and promises of the ideologies of this world. . . The exemplification of redeemed humanity in the lordship of Jesus Christ in this age means a resilient and tireless witness to confound, rebuke and undo every regime, and every potential regime”. (Stringfellow)

We can describe this freedom we have as ‘biblical politics.’ The more time we spend with the Bible the more we realise that everything is merged into a biblical scheme, and like Blind Bartemaeus we learn to see reality again, only differently. There is no compartmentalisation of our person and no false pietism; no false segregation of private and public; no domination of false religion and its conservatism and restraint; no domination of wealth and ideology, or budgets and tradition; and ultimately no domination of violence, which is always the manifestation of the power of death. The practical freedom we have in Christ is to be the church of Christ, right here, just where we are, in obedience to Christ in the ordinariness of the world.

This is the simplicity of the Christian life – to discern (see and hear) and rely upon (reckless and uncalculated dependence) and to celebrate (the ready and spontaneous enjoyment – the response of adoration and worship) the presence of the Word of God in the common life of the world. Ultimately, our freedom is

to be found in the manifestation of the gifts of the spirit in our common life – a political and transformative occurrence to be sure. And that, I believe, is the greatest practical freedom from the domination of violence we have.

Not said at the gathering, but worth adding: What might the ethics of involvement look like? Stringfellow speaks of it in the following terms:

Realism

The Christian regards the actual day-to-day existence of the world realistically, and takes it seriously. Living in freedom from the power of Death, the Christian is the most blunt and relentless realist, able to face the world as it is without flinching, fear, surprise, embarrassment, sentimentality, guile or disguise. The Christian is free to live in the world as it is.

Inconsistency

In faithfulness to the Gospel, the Christian will always appear inconsistent to others in public views and opinions. This is as it should be, because the Christian is nonideological in politics. Although the Christian acts for this or that cause in society, she doesn't do it as the servant of some race, ideological agenda, or political system, but out of freedom from such idols.

Radicalism

The Christian is never satisfied. The stance of the Christian is perpetually in a position of dissent about the status quo, whatever it happens to be (that's why we need to be weary of identifying too strongly with any political ideology, left or right). The only axe the Christian has to grind is that of authentic community or just society in the midst of injustice and inauthenticity. We hold the state to account. We are aliens, standing in protest. At no time should we confuse the nation and its attainments with the Kingdom of God.

Intercession

We are concerned politically for everyone. The characteristic sign of the inclusiveness and extremity of our concern is expressed and embodied in our specific care for those who are least in society, those ignored, forgotten or cast out and abandoned. But also we must embrace the 'enemy' – those who we may oppose – or those who would oppose us and deny the freedom of our witness. Ultimately, it means demonstrating the true society to the world by the living example of the society of the church as a movement, in which our work is worship. That is at the heart of the Christian political witness. Political witness is fundamentally a spiritual discipline.