

ONE LOSER: CHRISTIANITY

Cathedral, Christmas Morning 2017

We have a house on the beach not far from the Whirinaki mill. Apart from the view, one of the very best things is the neighbourhood. A diverse bunch, the warm relationships are the best of being kiwi. The houses are swanky to scruffy and everything in between. We turned up the other afternoon to do some maintenance and stopped to chat with our neighbour Doug, who was doing up a classic car.

Flags flying nearby on one of the posh houses caught my attention. What was that Confederate flag doing there? Doug said when his son-in-law visited he took one look and drove away. His wife is Maori. We were angry and ashamed.

Some of you may recall that I said recently that racist demonstrations in America matter here because American influence bleeds into our society. We all know the Confederate flag means the subjugation and slavery of black people being defended by the state and justified from Scripture. I've never seen a Confederate flag flying in Aotearoa before.

John's Gospel opens with the statement "In the beginning was the Word", and goes on to explain that the Word creates everything that exists. This Gospel asserts that when we see Jesus, we see what God is like, and when we listen to Jesus, we are hearing a creative Word from God. This is the core of Christianity: to respond to the person of Jesus in love and obedience; to be Christ's One, and to follow his Way of being in the world, such that the earliest Christians were called, as you will remember, people of the Way.

Just so in our lives today the way words are used shape our reality. Are you a patient, or a Health Care Consumer? And why are those words being chosen and presented to us? Symbols, such as the Confederate flag, invite people to identify with a particular construction (or re-construction) of reality.

It was very troubling in this past week to read about a New Zealand born Samoan man in Christchurch being insulted with the n-word and gorilla

noises. His comment was that people like him live with low-level racism constantly. What is particularly disturbing is that racists (wherever they live) are hearing dogwhistle words of permission from Donald Trump and his cronies. They are noting that he would not talk about white supremacists or Nazis provoking violence which resulted in one woman's death in Charlottesville.

The current American president has uttered so many falsehoods that truth is losing its grip on the American psyche. How do you withstand an avalanche of falsehood – well over 1600 lies or misleading statements in nine months? Even more sinister was his recent requirement of the Center for Disease Control and other agencies to stop using certain words: entitlement; transgender; evidence-based; science-based, diversity, fetus, vulnerable.

We have to ask ourselves what is being brought to birth when such blatant manipulation, such authoritarianism is seeking to destroy freedom of speech and genuine democracy. It is George Orwell with bells on. It is the “Ministry of Truth”. It is NewSpeak.

American Evangelicalism, which grew out of the segregated South, has become so prostituted by its support for appalling people (like Roy Moore) in leadership that it's being called Fox Evangelicalism.

Even the Editor of “Christianity Today” magazine had this to say:

No matter the outcome of today's special election in Alabama for a coveted US Senate seat, there is already one loser: Christian faith. When it comes to either matters of life and death or personal commitments of the human heart, no one will believe a word we say, perhaps for a generation. Christianity's integrity is severely tarnished.

The race between Republican candidate Roy Moore and Democratic candidate Doug Jones has only put an exclamation point on a problem that has been festering for a year and a half—ever since a core of strident conservative Christians began to cheer for Donald Trump without qualification and a chorus of other believers decried that support as immoral. The Christian leaders who have excused, ignored, or justified his

unscrupulous behavior and his indecent rhetoric have only given credence to their critics who accuse them of hypocrisy.

What concerns me is the bleed into NZ society not just of Trump's repugnant attitudes but to the perception of NZ Christians in general. And beyond that, each one of us who is willing to name ourselves as Christian will not only need wisdom in responding to others' curiosity about why on earth we would hold this faith, but also courage and fortitude when we encounter those blank, dismissive looks from the secular intelligentsia. Either that or we bail out by joining in the laughter at our bizarre hobby.

The point of Christmas has precious little to do with sentimentalism about babies. The point of the stories is that God's only way of really getting through to us is to come and be truly human, among us, to teach us his costly way, and to show us the lengths to which love will go in forgiveness by way of his brutal execution. And to demonstrate that such love cannot, ultimately, be extinguished or killed. What matters about the baby is that he is born in the most precarious circumstances of threat and vulnerability. He is utterly dependent on the choices and the courage of Mary and Joseph.

English priest Giles Fraser talks about the popular Christmas, “The kitsch Jesus” thus:

...it's this same kitsch Jesus of sentimental benevolence that features in countless Christmas cards and community carol services. The baby in the manger now presides over a celebration of feel-good bonhomie that makes the true meaning of Christmas almost impossible to articulate. ...

*The temptation to disassociate the divine from material reality marks the beginnings of kitsch. For, once unhitched from the divine, the complexity of the world can be too easily by-passed and ignored. The orthodox formulation of the incarnation allows no way of avoiding politics, food, sex or money. Nor, as the Christian story of God goes on to make horribly clear, does it offer a way of avoiding suffering and death. The problem isn't that Christmas has become too materialistic - but rather that it isn't materialistic enough.**

Let me just add an emphasis to what he says here: *The orthodox formulation of the incarnation allows no way of avoiding politics.* In other words, If you want to take the birth of Jesus seriously, then it must call to account the whole of the way you and I live our lives.

So what I ask you to do today is to pay attention to the importance of truth, to remain anchored in the One whom we call the Way, the Truth and the Life. Let us contemplate honestly and without fear what Pandora's box has been opened in society. May we resist every attempt to further divide us from one another by attitude, manipulation of language, political structures, or flags and what they represent.

Hear again these words from John 1 in the Message version:

*The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.*

Our neighbourhood could certainly do with that in 2018.

- Ian Render

*<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/dec/16/religion.christmas>