

Sermon Palm Sunday 130414

I want to begin this morning by telling you about a charismatic minister who became a pacifist and who founded a Christian community.

His name was not George MacLeod – that is another story.

His name was Adin Ballou. He was a Unitarian minister and he founded the Hopedale Community in Massachusetts.

This radical Christian abolitionist and pacifist wrote these words in 1846:

Instead of discussion and argument, brute force rises up to the rescue of discomfited error, and crushes truth and right into the dust. 'Might makes right,' and hoary folly totters on in her mad career escorted by armies and navies.

This is the first recorded use in English of the expression 'might makes right'. However, this aphorism, this observation on the struggle between good and evil, echoes down through the centuries and similar expressions can be found in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds in the writings of Thucydides, Socrates and Plato.

This epic struggle, this battle between elemental forces rages wherever children play out their fantasies in the guise of superheroes and super villains. When our younger son was a boy, his toy box contained an army of muscular superheroes and legions of malevolent creatures most of them merchandise spin offs from the latest blockbuster movie.

Children identify with the heroes, the good guys, who always win, who must always win no matter the odds and numbers stacked against them.

The baddies must always lose in the end

– whether it is High Noon or Star Wars

– the formula never changes.

The good, the right outcome, the victory is achieved by defeating the baddie, by inflicting greater punishment on the bad guy than he is able to inflict on others. The solution to every problem, every area of conflict is the use of force. Good triumphs in the end – might is right.

Perhaps what is most disturbing about these childhood games is that aggression and violence are copied not from the bad guys but from the good guys and this ability to crush the enemy is what makes a superhero.

Sadly, this attitude can be reinforced by parents who encourage their children, especially boys, to stick up for themselves, hit back harder or get their retaliation in first. Alas unlike their superheroes young boys bleed. But why should our children be any different from the societies which produced them. Too many children grow up surrounded by violence – in the home, on the streets, all around our wounded world.

And when used to discipline or deter, to maintain law and order, to defeat the enemy – violence is both accepted and permitted.

This world believes Might makes Right.

The notion of redemptive violence has very long historical roots. It can be traced back through the Greek and Roman civilisations to the religion of ancient Babylon.

Early Babylonian civilisation was constantly under threat. Chaos threatened at the hand of nature – flood, drought, storm and earthquake.

Chaos threatened by recurrent warfare as fledgling city states competed for resources and dominance.

The religion of Babylon reflected this context.

The creation myth of the Babylonians tells of a dispute between the elder gods and the younger gods. The elder gods plotted to kill their younger upstarts but their plot was discovered.

In the murder and mayhem which followed the youngest god, Marduk, emerged triumphant, the undisputed power. By violent means Marduk was victorious and he brought order preventing chaos. Then, out of the corpse of one of his victims, so the story goes, Marduk created the world.

Thus, in Babylonian myth, creation is an act of violence. And it follows from this that evil existed before creation and that force is the means by which evil is controlled.

This ancient myth is the very first articulation of 'might makes right' but it lives on today wherever societies are underpinned by the belief that order is maintained only by the use of force, only through a hierarchical model of domination and control.

The adventures of children's superheroes and the exploits of secret agents, and a good deal of what passes for international relations are based on this premise. Vladimir Putin believes in it and so does NATO, but we are the good guys so that's ok then. Yet surely, the long history of conflict on every continent must convince us of its folly and of the need for the hope of another way.

Maybe through this Holy Week we need to ask ourselves, in all seriousness, are we closet Babylonians?

Holy Week is a time of reflection, repentance, renewal and new life.

A time when the life of Jesus of Nazareth comes into sharp focus with all its humanity and compassion, all its suffering and anguish.

A time when the myth of redemptive violence is challenged by the message of the Gospel.

In the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, we find a creation myth which is the complete opposite of that of the Babylonians.

According to the Book of Genesis a good God creates a good creation.

Chaos does not resist order therefore there is no need for violence.

Good is prior to evil.

Evil, therefore, is not a fact of creation but results from the free will and free decision, the moral judgements of human beings.

Our Palm Sunday readings reveal Jesus' rejection of the myth of redemptive violence.

The Babylonian in us would have Jesus enter Jerusalem proclaiming himself the Messiah, the Liberator of Israel, upon a mighty stallion flanked by legions of armed followers marching as to war, ready to challenge the forces of the evil Empire. Jesus Christ Superhero.

The scene which actually unfolds is absurd, deliberately absurd and subversive, a parody of our expectations and of the pretensions of the powerful in his age and in every age. Jesus, here as elsewhere in the Gospels, appears to stage manage the fulfilment of ancient prophecies.

An unemployed carpenter from Nazareth perched upon donkey rented by the hour, accompanied by prodigal sons and wayward daughters, by snotty street kids and bewildered bystanders, and more foliage than your average floral art club.

Thus is the prophecy of Zechariah fulfilled:

Rejoice, rejoice, people of Zion, your king is coming to you, triumphant and victorious but humble and riding on a donkey.

What Matthew does not tell us, his readers, because he assumes that we know, is that this is not the big attraction in Jerusalem on this day.

The main event is happening on the other side of the city at the Main Gate not the backdoor.

Passover would soon be celebrated. The Faithful, the Festival goers and the fanatics flock into the Holy City remembering oppression under the Egyptians whilst experiencing occupation by the Romans. I am sure the irony was lost on them. Religious and national fervour at this time often erupted into unrest and riot so the occupying army fortified its garrison with legions from Caesarea Philippi.

This is the military parade that Jesus and his followers deliberately parodied. War horses, battle-hardened troops swept into the city – imperial standards carried high, Spring sunlight reflected on sword and shield – daring any who would challenge Roman Rule.

Might makes Right.

Meanwhile, back on the other side of town, Jesus announced his arrival with a piece of agitprop, street theatre with a subversive message that would be well understood by those who witnessed it. Those who witnessed

Jesus parade were invited to be part of the drama. Those who witnessed Pilate's parade are reduced to passive spectators by the show of force designed to put them in their place.

Jesus mocks the rulers of this world who adorn themselves with wealth and power lording over the people. Jesus parodies their military parades, processions of State and Presidential motorcades. Jesus rejects such notions of power for his is a different kind of kingship. Jesus rejects the hierarchical model of domination and control, the relationship of master and servant, in favour of the relationship of equals, of friends.

Jesus does not want to take over from Herod or Pilate, as Pilate later suspects, rather Jesus wants to sweep away the whole domination system. Might does not make right.

When we proclaim Jesus as king we bring down all other imposters from their thrones. All other kings, queens, presidents, princes, dictators and Supreme Leaders need not apply – the position is filled.

Instead of the pyramidal structure of most human institutions with which we are familiar – the hierarchies of monarchy, big business even the church – Jesus has given us another model in the image of a vine with many branches. They are one organism, there is true relationship and connectedness – the vine draws strength from the roots and nourishes all the branches enabling them to prosper and bear fruit

Whilst those who believe that might makes right take from those they subjugate, the power of the Christ strengthens the weak, heals the sick, empowers the poor.

Through his humility, humanity and his self-giving, we see the myth of redemptive violence disarmed by the possibility of redemptive suffering.

In sharing bread and wine in his memory, we proclaim his death, point to his wounds to show the full horror and ugliness for violence has no redemptive qualities.

In sharing bread and wine we bear witness to the reality that violence and domination do not have the last word for the poor are blessed, as are those who mourn, who are humble, who are righteous and merciful, who are pure in heart, who work for peace and who are persecuted in Jesus' name.

But we cannot take bread and wine, we cannot celebrate our communion with one another and with God and then collude with the forces of violence and domination that seek to rule this world.

Rather we are called to work for a more equal and just and peaceful world following the teaching and sometimes costly example of Jesus.

As we begin our journey through Holy Week which parade will we join? Will we deny the claims of redemptive violence with all its seductions of power and pomp, its quick fixes and easy solutions, its euphemisms of destruction and death, of ethnic cleansing and collateral damage.

Or will we bear witness to the power of love, of forgiveness, of redemptive suffering and so to embrace the Risen Christ? Amen.