

Does Christianity kill or cure?

By Simon Barrow

It is hard to overestimate the divisions of the world right now. Even as the myth of unity-through-consumption is pumped out by our media monitors, the armies of one side confront the suicide bombers of another.

Across the globe many religionists portray tsunami as the judgement of an angry God against human waywardness. Others, of all faiths and none, see it as a tragic cry for compassion and justice.

In the USA one side elevates the nation's aspirations into an almost sacred ideal, while the opposing side denounces its ambitions as dangerous and wrong.

Christians, to name but one segment of warring humanity, are split apart by violence, by wealth (or lack of it), by relations with those of other faiths, by sexuality, by politics, by culture, by the way they read the Bible, and by who and what they believe in.

When the events, resources and texts that are supposed to unite people merely reveal their apparent irreconcilability, is searching for commonality amidst radical difference a hopeless, abstract ideal? Can our divisions be healed? What hope conversation in place of cacophony?

As David Jenkins puts it in his marvellous book, *The Contradiction of Christianity* (SCM Press, 1976), the fundamental issue is about "whether I am trapped in being me, whether every tribal 'we' is trapped in being an exclusive 'us' and whether there is any realistic hope of a way of being human which fulfils us all."

On the surface the evidence is clear. The behaviour of Christians and the performance of their institutions often render utterly incredible anything they might want to say about what the Gospel stands for. Christianity can cure, but equally it can kill.

Why bother with it, then? The Christian conviction is that the Word of life has become flesh. This means that the 'answers' we seek are not to be found in infallible texts or unassailable propositions, but in and through the vulnerable humanity to which God is committed.

So the only response that is adequate both to the scale of our human dilemma and to the nature of what is unveiled in the Gospel is (quite against our instincts for tidiness and convenience) the difficult truth of a person.

In the counter-story and lived reality of Jesus of Nazareth -- a narrative about being truly human, but also about a living God who is quite unlike our ideas of

'godness' – we see 'in the flesh' the surprising, redemptive potential of diversity in the face of division.

Put simply, Christ's is the less-travelled Way marked by open tables, acceptance of 'outsiders', refusal of violence, challenge to the rich, forgiveness and repentance, resistance to the powers-that-be, conflict through the cross, the foretaste of risen life, and the shock of the Spirit – the one who surprises us with liberated meaning.

What we long for in Jesus' company, therefore, is not mere 'tolerance' or illusory power for ourselves. It is the impossible possibility of God's domination-free kingdom (or 'kin-dom', as a South African theologian once beautifully put it).

The Gospel is about precisely this unimaginable love. It is a love that subjugates power so as to absorb rather than inflict violence, to embrace rather than deny suffering, and to endure in (rather than escape from) death.

Here exists an alternative understanding of 'freedom' not as random license but as disciplined commitment. Those who grasp at life lose it, says Jesus. Only those who are prepared to lose can gain, because what they are gaining is far greater than mere self-propagation.

Of course what makes this promise possible (and for many, impossible) is that, by definition, it can only arise from the unconstrained life of God, not from our own capabilities, fantasies and projections.

For this reason the God who exists beyond metaphysics and manipulation is met in a crucifixion brought about by religious and political power, not in the comforts of consumer 'spirituality' or in the self-regard of those who claim God as their own.

As the playwright Dennis Potter put it, on the threshold of his own death from cancer, "I have come to see that religion is the wound not the bandage." This is not the Gospel we thought we knew, but one given to us beyond our means.

To be authentically 'church' is to be the community made possible by this realisation. It is to open up an encounter with those who are different to us. It is to be possessed by the crazy idea that chaos, conflict and contract are not the only possible renderings of diversity. There is covenant towards communion too.

Rescue (salvation) is the unspeakable necessity that meets us in the Gospel as we consider what this hope really requires, however. We cannot do it on our own. We need to be radically changed, personally and politically.

The baptism we are offered, through death to life, is the means for this. It is not a reduction into a narrow, self-affirming, life-denying sect, as many preach and believe today. Rather it is slow, continuous transformation within a community of welcome and rejection, gathering and dispersal.

We welcome people, but we reject what degrades and divides. We gather as the Body broken and renewed, but we receive that brokenness and renewal in the world, not in our favoured religious hiding places.

At the heart of this Ekklesia, the assembled and sent-out community, is prayer. This is the language of donation through which we understand that the life we share is given to us, not possessed by us.

Similarly, worship is the means to identify whose we are and what is really worshipful (worth-it-full). It is this that forms us in the face of masses of things that claim dominion over our humanity: money, possessions, status, allure, xenophobia, violence, greed and self-absorption.

The fruit of the Gospel community, then, is not exclusion but embrace, not detachment but engagement, not credulity but critical thought. This is extremely difficult for Christians in a world where they have been offered, and taken, power along the lines of the 'religious right' in the US.

To be people of God is to lose this dangerous desire to 'be in control' and to recognise the significance of not being finally determined by who we are and what we do. This is what is meant by 'being made in the image of God'.

So the challenge to the conventionally religious of Jesus' day was to abandon a fearful misreading of their rituals, texts and institutions – the one that enabled them to condemn those who God loves: strangers, the poor, the excluded, the odd, the 'unclean' and the marginalised.

This is also the challenge in our day. Those who turn God into a sentimental sop for their own egos or into a tyrannical buttress for their own interests are not walking Jesus' path. His is a road where you will find strangers and enemies, outcasts and friends – all those invited into the Feast of Life.

This, then, is the Gospel's radical portrait of what is involved in reconciling difference. And what are the alternatives? One is the superpower heresy that enables us to project all the evil 'out there' and to seek to bomb or suppress it into submission. That isn't Christianity, it's Manichaeism.

Another is the kind of religion that turns love into hatred, God into a despot, and faith into a revoltingly pious exercise in self-delusion. It doesn't matter much whether it quotes the Bible, the Qur'an, the Bhagavad-Gita or the Buddha, for it is blinded by what it preaches.

A third is that distortion of empiricism, positivism and rationalism which says humans are nothing more than the sum of their own parts. This is a self-constructed 'whole' that leaves us tragically bereft of the actual resources that are on offer if the Gospel is anything like true.

The challenge, of course, is that this Gospel does not allow us to write off the 'others' of religious and secular fundamentalism, either. In the face of hate and death-dealing, Jesus embodied the difficult, narrow call to shared life – and paid the price. To be a disciple of his is to live by the conviction that his death is not the end of hope, but its beginning.

If we took this message seriously and joyfully others might still think us bonkers. But at least we Christians might have something worth calling Good News on our hands. That's much better than colluding with the appalling betrayals of religion that lead from 'faith' to fratricide, from 'curing' to killing.

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