

## ***History and God***

*Jeremiah 1:4-10*

*Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24*

Some readers may remember the student riots that convulsed Paris in 1968. One of their slogans was: 'Be realistic: demand the impossible'. Despite its hyperbole the slogan is accurate in the sense that what is needed to repair and renovate society is beyond the powers of the prevailing system. For this was the goal of the riots and general strike. The aim of the students and workers was to create a new society that was not dominated by capitalism, consumerism, and traditional institutions. Although the movement failed in its political ambitions it is considered to this day to have been a cultural, social, and moral turning point in the history of the French nation.

A century and a half earlier than 1968, Karl Marx looked to the creation of a new society. He also believed that it was beyond the powers of the prevailing system to bring into existence a new society with just institutions. He believed that an inevitable class struggle would establish a socialist society that would redress the inequalities of a capitalist socio-economic system. Whether this will happen, and in what way, is still debated by modern interpreters of Marx.

I have referred to the Paris riots and to Karl Marx because both Marx and the French students and workers were concerned about the direction of history and how history could be shaped in order to move in a way that brought into existence human communities in which all the participants flourished. It is true that both Marx and the students have long been dismissed as those who had impossible utopian dreams. As a result it is perhaps also true, as some observers have remarked, that our early 21st century society is totally skeptical about whether society can be repaired and renovated. These observers suggest, and I am inclined to agree with them, that 21st century societies try to keep things on an even keel by valorising 'governance' and 'risk management' techniques. However, despite the application of these band-aids, vast numbers of human beings are still vitally concerned by the question raised by Marx and the French students as the world-wide pressure being exerted by asylum seekers and economic migrants reveals.

Just as social conditions effected the actions of Marx and the Parisian students and workers, so were the prophets of God compelled to speak a divine word about the socio-economic and cultural conditions of Israel's life circa 2500 BCE. Today we are concerned mainly with the prophet Jeremiah who speaks the word of God to Israel at a particular time. The time involves the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire and the reconstruction of Jerusalem by Jewish exiles returning to Palestine after a long captivity in Babylon. The whole book is concerned to affirm that history is made by the actions of God in the societies formed by human beings. The book of Jeremiah proclaims that the concrete ways in which history is made by God cannot be known in advance by people. Indeed men and women only know what history God has made in retrospect. But although this is the case, human beings can know that the history God makes is always an expression of his faithfulness to his creatures. This is to say that God is always faithful to the promise that he made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses to lead the people to close communion with Godself. It is a promise that is being fulfilled, according to the New Testament, in Christ Jesus.

Although we cannot know in advance the exact shape of the history that is being made by God, we do have some inkling of how God's eventfulness has made history and how that eventfulness will continue to make history. We can get a glimpse of how this happens if we consider how the Christian movement spread across the Roman Empire in the relatively short time of three centuries. According to historians Roman cities, although smaller than the standards of today, were crowded, filthy, and disease ridden. In the midst of the squalor and illness Christianity provided an island of mercy. In about 98 CE, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, told Polycarp, the bishop Smyrna, to provide special support for widows. In 251 CE the bishop of Rome, in a letter to another bishop, mentioned that the Roman church was supporting fifteen hundred widows and distressed people. (Stark 112). This practice of the Christians contradicted the advice of pagan philosophers who regarded mercy as a character defect because mercy involves providing unearned help and is, they argued, contrary to justice. The small Christian communities that acted mercifully eventually attracted the interest of the wider community.

Recently I read an article written by a Chinese Christian about the church in China. He claimed that the practice of church communities would be the leaven in that society that would eventually change the Chinese body politic. This was the case because Christians elected their church leaders. This practice he claimed would attract the attention of a general populace that had no experience of voting and provide the catalyst for change. Such an assertion may, of course, be fanciful. Whether it proves to be fanciful or not the point is that we catch glimpses of the eventfulness of God in history in the kinds of practises I have described.

The French students and workers in 1968 and Karl Marx in the nineteenth century were concerned about history. They were concerned about what it was that shaped and *made* history. The Hebrews of 2500 BCE and Christians of two millennia assert that it is God whose acts constitute history. While the specifics of that history cannot be predicted - 'I will be who I will be' - we can say that the faithfulness God has shown his beloved creatures in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus will always shape the activity of God in history. For this reason humanity, as the letter to the Hebrews asserts, will arrive at the spacetime where God's rule is all in all.

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