

Letting go the past: Receiving the Future

(Philippians 3:3b-14)

Philosophers and social critics have, for quite a few years now, been claiming that we are living in a post-modern age. One thing that characterises the post-modern age, they hold, is the decline of metanarratives. A metanarrative is a culturally dominant story that claims to give social and individual life meaning and order. But there are, these scholars claim, other, neglected, narratives in society that attribute different meanings to life, and the way it can be lived. It is time, they claim, that these narratives had their day in the sun. In Australia one of these narratives are the stories of the aborigines. The metanarrative the philosophers identify as having had the most influence on Western style societies is Christianity. They usually judge it to have had a bad influence.

One consequence of this analysis by philosophers and social critics is that the concept of 'pluralism' has come to be regarded as very important in the political and social life of the nation. In reference to religion it has come to mean that no faith has the full or final truth: each faith perceives a valid but incomplete part of the truth. Pluralism means that no faith can or should make claims for itself as the only route to salvation for humanity. If a faith does do this it is derided as being bigoted and narrow minded. Christianity has copped a fair bit of criticism along these lines.

This understanding of pluralism, however, is a problem for Christianity. This is the case because Christianity claims that the man Jesus is also the Christ. The Greek word 'Christ' is a translation of the Hebrew word 'Messiah'. The messiah is the figure Israel expected God to send to inaugurate a renewed creation and a renewed and healed humanity. This is the way that all humanity would be saved. The church came to believe and proclaim that the man Jesus had been raised from the dead and was, therefore, the expected messiah. This belief led to the claim that Jesus, now also known as the Christ, is the truth, and the hope of the world. Whatever way you cut it this is a universal claim. It was something that Paul regarded as being more important than his nation, his religion, his culture, and his achievements. It was so important to him that he regarded who he had been a loss "because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." The question, I think, is whether there is anything about Jesus the Christ that can justify this claim?

Before I have something to say about this question I need to say that there is one way for Christianity to solve the problem of living in a society that values pluralism. Some people who are involved in the church claim to have an answer. They claim that Jesus was a profound teacher who had many important and positive things to say to people. As such he presumably takes his place alongside other wise and good men and women through history. Tragically, this story goes, the church turned Jesus into the Christ, and this making Jesus into the universal truth caused boundless human misery. What we need to do, they assert, is to reclaim Jesus as the wise and good teacher and get rid of the idea of Jesus as the messiah. The idea of the messiah and the name 'Christ' should be consigned to history along with, I think we can assume, confessions of the resurrection. This is not a new idea. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, writing in the nineteenth century, praised Jesus the Teacher and blamed St Paul for turning Jesus into the Christ and messing everything up. The people who advocate this position label themselves as 'progressive' Christians.

But if we find this answer unpalatable we are left with the question I asked before. Is there anything that the church has proclaimed about Jesus the Christ that can justify the claim that his particular life is the harbinger of new life for all? Is there anything that justifies his life being the metanarrative that reorders and heals human society? Paul obviously thought there was and I want to explore why he, a faithful and knowledgeable Jew, became such an ardent disciple of Jesus the Christ.

It is very important to know that Paul did not become a disciple of Jesus Christ because he felt that he was a miserable failure as a human being and needed to be forgiven for his sins. He was not converted after being made aware of his sin. The contrary is the case. Paul felt that he had many notable achievements to his account. He also believed that as a good Jew he had lived an exemplary moral life. Indeed Paul held that he was morally blameless. So what struck Paul so forcibly was not a need to be saved from his sin, but rather a sense of wonder at God's right-making activity on behalf of humanity.

What changed Paul's whole outlook was God's passionate faithfulness to his creation and its human creatures as he came to see that faithfulness embodied in the self-

emptying love of the crucified and risen Jesus the Christ. What hit Paul like a thunderbolt was the realisation was that the making-right action of God in Christ was actually the occurrence of the creation being renewed in the image of Christ's life. Paul wanted more than anything to be part of creation's healing and, therefore, the healing of humanity.

What Paul encountered was an action of God that effected nature and all humanity. But it was not an imperialist story or metanarrative that dominated people although the church, to its great shame, has often tried to turn it into a controlling story. It was not a imperialist story because humanity encounter it as the powerless and constant love of the risen crucified Christ. It is important that we say it this way – 'risen crucified' Christ – because the risen and glorious Christ Jesus is always the loving and outpoured one we know on the cross. Anyone who coerces or manipulates another in the name of Christ Jesus is quite simply a heretic.

I think that Paul would make the claim that the right-making action of God in Christ Jesus that changed his life so dramatically is a metanarrative that brings the beginning, where Christian communities are faithful, and the promise of fulfilment, of a healed creation and humanity. In making this claim, controlled and embodied as it is in Christ Jesus, it is not bigoted or narrow-minded and that it is the story that is humanity's salvation.

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