

John Docherty, October 21, 2018

Let me sit at your right hand

The passage that was read from Mark 10 is a bit of a revelation in some ways. The glimpse into the ambitions of James and John, and the reaction of the other ten disciples, is troubling, and it gives us a sense that this group is less coherent than at least *I* would like to think.

My own usual image of the twelve, with the possible exception of Judas, is that they are kindred spirits of Jesus;

that they are soaking up his words and becoming imbued with the same vision that drives Jesus;

that they are there for the right reasons, even if they *do* have the mistaken idea that Jesus is going to usher in a political kingdom.

This passage gives us the impression that they're a little less like a loyal band of kindred spirits, and more like a group in the reality show 'Survivor', or 'Big Brother' : shifting this way and that; forming alliances; positioning themselves for maximum personal benefit.

It's not a particularly pretty picture, but, at the same time, it's a fairly human picture of fairly ordinary humans who are engaged in what can reasonably be described as a socio-political religious movement.

They clearly each have their own personal motivations for being with Jesus – or, at the very least, they've each developed their own expectations with regard to what being with Jesus might mean for them personally.

There's nothing inherently wrong with that – it's natural that someone would wonder about their own role in something like this, and that one might be drawn to a particular place in the project, depending on one's skill set, interests, and aspirations.

What seems to be the issue here is that James and John aren't content to let Jesus define their roles : they're taking direct initiative in trying to exact a promise from him that they will occupy positions of privilege and power, at the expense, presumably, of the other ten disciples.

And while it's true that Mark states that “the other disciples were indignant” when they heard what James and John had asked, it strikes me that the disciple who was most

likely to be indignant, and demonstrably so, is Peter.

He does seem to be, after all, the recognized leader of the twelve, after Jesus.

Peter, James and John also seem to be the closest confidants of Jesus.

We're told in Mark 9, and Luke 9, and Matthew 17, that when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain top, he took with him only Peter, James and John.

In Mark 5, when Jesus goes to heal the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue, he only allows Peter, James and John to accompany him.

When he goes to Gethsemane, in Mark 14, he allows Peter, James and John to accompany him deep into the garden while the others are asked to wait apart.

So this move on James and John's part is also a direct challenge to Peter's place in Jesus' coming kingdom, essentially trying to elbow him out of a leading role.

It's very clearly a political move, and one that provides Jesus with an opportunity to define his view of what constitutes good leadership – leadership that serves, rather than leadership that expects to *be* served.

And *that* view of leadership is, I think, one that Mennonites have taken to heart. There might be instances of abuse of position; abuse of power that comes with a certain role; but I think in general Mennonites have espoused the servanthood of leaders in healthy ways.

We look to those in positions of responsibility to exercise that responsibility without “lording it over” the rest of us. We are, after all, a community built on the idea that we are, in our entirety, a priesthood of believers, where no-one is more or less important than the others, though we may have varied gifts.

When I started working on this meditation, I thought this was the trajectory I'd follow : a look at what challenges it raises for us as we try to embody a servanthood approach to our relationships with each other, whether we're in a position of leadership or not.

I realize that it's a fairly well-trodden path, and at this point I'd like to veer off that path, and instead try to wade through some of the undergrowth that surrounds it, and that can make it difficult for us to even see the paths that others are on.

Other Christian traditions have, of course, also adopted forms of leadership that try to balance clerical power with congregational and individual authority and responsibility –

with more or less success, depending on the model chosen.

All of our traditions build on our particular reading of this Book; a particular way of understanding how to interpret and put into place the truths we pull from its pages. We obviously don't all establish the same priorities, according to our reading, but we all claim to be trying to follow faithfully what we find here.

And this is what I mean by the undergrowth that separates our various paths : we all claim to be trying to follow faithfully what we find here, but we don't all approach this Book in the same way. We all agree that this Book is the guidebook of our faith, but we don't all agree on how we should read it.

In MFM's mail this week, I found this book : “Gospel Reset : Salvation made relevant”. The slipcover has the following quote regarding the author : “His message is uncompromising, compassionate, encouraging, and most timely.”

The author is described on the slipcover as being “... one of the top biblical apologetic speakers in North America. He is the president, CEO, and founder of Answers in Genesis-US, [as well as] the highly acclaimed Creation Museum, and the world-renowned Ark Encounter.”

If any of you are interested, it also came with an offer of two free tickets to each of these Christian theme park – type attractions.

It is clearly written from a very theologically conservative standpoint and if it was a bigger tome I probably wouldn't have taken the time to wade through it, but it looked like an easy read, and I was intrigued by the quote about it being compassionate and timely, so I read through it on Thursday.

It's a book that echoes some of Stuart Murray's arguments in “The Naked Anabaptist” - i.e. That we are living in a social environment where Christianity is no longer the dominant part of our social consciousness, and that we need to adapt the way we share the Good News to that changed environment.

So far, so good.

What this author then does is argue that we have to learn how to show people that the Bible is more trustworthy than what we've learned in school about the age of the Earth, among other things.

He argues that any reading other than a literal reading of every word of the Bible is missing the mark somehow, and that the truth of the matter is that we need to read

Genesis in particular as a faithful and scientifically accurate description of God's creative act, accomplished in six twenty-four hour days.

The Earth's age, then, cannot be more than six thousand years if we calculate by following the genealogical information that is provided to us.

If we *don't* accept the Genesis account as being scientifically accurate, then we've undermined everything else that follows, because if Genesis is not literally true, then nothing else can be taken at face value.

I have to admit that reading this book generated a visceral response on my part that caught me off guard. I expected a conservative argument, but I didn't expect it to be quite so conservative or quite so rigid.

One of the reasons that I decided to read it was that it was free, and I'm enough of a stereotypical Scot to find that appealing in itself. The fact that I ultimately found the book unsatisfying *did* diminish the pleasure of a free read, so *that* was a little unexpected too.

Another reason I decided to read it through was that I was curious to know what his approach might be to making the Gospel message relevant.

Making it relevant by arguing for a literal six day creation period left me with my head spinning a little, even though his argument is that we need to read the Bible as an infallible text, and that if there was no literal, singular Adam and Eve, then there was no Fall of humanity, and therefore no need for salvation.

I have so much problem with that position, on so many levels, that reading the book left me shaking my head in wonder, and a bit discouraged by just how far apart our approaches are.

I had hoped to gain some insight into a more conservative viewpoint than my own, even given that I come from a conservative background, but taking into account that I've been accused of having become "ultra-liberal". But I was by turns left disheartened, incredulous, and even, to some extent, frustrated, at the tone of some of what I was reading.

The underlying political stance in this theological position was also a bit off-putting. For example, he says the following :

"Do you know who really helped facilitate this change [from a Bible-believing culture to a secular culture], escalating it in a big way? President Barak Obama ... Here's what he

said ... :

‘Whatever we once were, we are no longer a Christian nation. At least not *just*. We are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, and a Buddhist nation, and a Hindu nation and a nation of non-believers.’ ...

That’s what he wanted to let everyone know, that he was going to fundamentally transform the predominant worldview of our nation from a Christianized one to a secular one.”

Whatever you may think of Barak Obama, he had his faults as well as his good qualities, I think it’s a bit of a stretch to accuse him of “fundamentally transforming the predominant worldview” of the United States.

I think I *did* gain some insight into an extreme fundamentalist reading of the Bible through reading this book, but that insight hasn’t allowed me to feel any less ambivalent about the risks inherent in that kind of theological position.

If anything, the read has left me with an increased wariness where that kind of worldview is concerned.

I love this Book.

I’ve enjoyed being forced to grapple with it over the last five and a half years as I’ve prepared meditations for our worship services.

I *do* take it seriously, and as a good Mennonite, I *do* tend to interpret parts of it literally :

- when Jesus says “love your enemy”, I think he means “love your enemy”.
- When he says “love God with everything you have, and love your neighbour as much as you love yourself”, I think that’s exactly what he means.
- When the book of Genesis says that God created the universe and saw that it was good, I take that literally.

That said, I don’t feel any need to try and harmonize the two different versions of creation that we find in chapters one and two. I can take them as imagery designed to paint a backdrop to our existence.

When Genesis speaks of Adam and Eve struggling to live lives of faithful allegiance to God while living under the cloud of their mortality, I don’t feel the need to believe in a literal, unique Adam and a literal unique Eve in order to believe that we are all in need of God’s help as we seek to build right relationships with each other.

I am capable of reading this Book as a collection of myriad voices giving us guidance as we make our way through life.

But I also believe, according to, and along with what I read in this Book, that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives;

that we have, instilled in us, a conscience;

a conscience informed by the Holy Spirit to help us navigate our lives properly, and to empower us to question, and perhaps challenge, the understandings of those who have gone before us.

And I also believe that as we read this Book together;

as we grapple together with its sometimes difficult passages;

as we share our lives and struggle to find ways of fully respecting and loving each other;

that we will find our way to God, and to each other.

And, although the path has been a convoluted one, if I can bring us back to James and John who asked Jesus to let them sit on his right and left side, and who seem clearly to be trying to outmanoeuvre the other disciples, and especially Peter :

I find it encouraging that after this incident Peter, James and John seem to have been able to get past what must have been a difficult period. James and John are called the “Sons of Thunder” by Jesus because of their brashness, and Peter is often portrayed as impetuous and volatile.

And yet, when Jesus goes to Gethsemane, it is this trio that follows him most deeply into the garden while the others slept.

It is this trio of Peter, James and John, who could have found themselves impossibly alienated from each other, that seem to have been able to take Jesus' words to heart and embrace the idea that they aren't to lord it over each other.

I don't need to believe in a world that has only existed for six thousand years to find hope in scenes like this.