

Engaging the Powers

EPILOGUE

From

THE TRUCE OF GOD

By

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This website has a definitely autobiographical strand to it, partly because the texts I have made use of, particularly in Part 2 and Parts 5, are amongst those which have influenced me most in my personal Christian pilgrimage (Part 2), and my personal 'engagement with the powers' (Part 5). Rowan Williams draws a powerful picture in *The Truce of God* of an unpeaceful Jesus who was aware to a perhaps superhuman extent of, on one hand, the meaning of the phrase 'The Kingdom of God', and on the other, of the extent to which the world in which he lived was Satanic. Jesus thus experienced, to the full, the cost of living in the conflict between the two kingdoms. It seems to me, that this picture points to true location of every Christian vocation. Our human experience of this conflict will be limited by our own imaginations and understandings, but we are called, as I see it, to place ourselves in the same unquiet location in which the incarnate Jesus placed himself in obedience to the Father. Rowan Williams' beautifully expressed meditation provides the best conclusion I could find to the website project of *Engaging the Powers*.

Fragments from Chapter 4

When the Jesus of the fourth gospel proclaims to his disciples, 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, not as the world gives, do I give to you' (John 14:27), the assurance most Christians tend to hear in these words is of a peace more secure and lasting than any world can offer. But this is not precisely what is said: 'not as the world gives' suggests both that the peace in question is not the same sort as anything we habitually call peace and that the giving itself is of a new and different order. What is offered and the way it is offered are alike a challenge to the world's peace. (p.67)

In all strands of the gospel tradition, Jesus is not a figure readily associated with peace in the sense of visible harmony. He provokes conflict and confrontation, and he says truly enough that he brings not peace but a sword (Matthew 10:34), that he comes to kindle a fire on earth (Luke 12:49) ...It may be true to say that through Jesus the world can discover a fundamental unity, a community of destiny, but it would be a fatal reduction of the Gospel to say that Jesus' work is simply the revelation of universal brotherhood. As has been said so often, it is hard to understand why anyone purveying such a bland message should ever be crucified...Before human unity can mean anything, we need to see why it is not so obvious - how situations have been created in which there is no community of interest and purpose between people. We need to grasp in penitence how we have co-operated in fragmenting a world called to unity. And this does not mean scraping away divisions and distractions to find an equality 'under the skin', but committing ourselves in our diversity to the creation of new and mutually enriching patterns of interaction. If our historical actions have created a divided world, our historical actions, our choice and speech and imagination, must create a world of positive mutuality. (pp.67/68)

Certainly it is true that when we talk about Christ's peace we must mean some kind of share in Jesus' life or experience; but insofar as we can say anything with confidence about what sort of a man Jesus was, there seems to be little to reassure us. The gospels do not present us with a figure marked by any evident serenity - rather with someone in important respects scarred by his own divisive role and painfully aware of the costliness of what he is doing...The crisis, the dividedness, seem to run through his own person. Spiritually as well as materially, it seems that the Son of Man has no place to lay his head, but that he must carry in himself both the compulsion of his calling, the unanswerable command to be the Father's Son in all things and to force the Kingdom closer, and the cold clarity of knowing that his presence as the Son and herald of the Kingdom is for some an occasion of sin and self-destruction. Without his presence, some might have lived and died in their innocence (John 15:22)...His irony, his imagination, his anger, his despair, his many-layered and anarchic wit, all of them stem from the struggle to make visible to all what is to him so visible that it needs no description and escapes all descriptions; and when he cries out against the obstinate stupidity of his hearers, it is because he has exhausted the resources of language and picture to no avail in trying to communicate to people what lies on front of their noses...(pp.69/70)

This is not peace, as we see it. Jesus is a man profoundly not at home with the world and his contemporaries, and so in our terms a singularly unpeaceful person...There is no peace for him on earth, in the present order. His life is directed towards the coming Kingdom - which is an order of peace quite different from the 'quiet life' we may long for. Jesus' miracles are often seen as 'signs of the Kingdom', clues to the fact that it is at the door; and they are miracles of freeing from bondage where the Father's will is done by the removal of what actively damages and limits human dignity. And the recurring image of the Kingdom's joy is the feast of the royal Messiah, the king's banquet thrown open to paupers, cripples, rogues and vagabonds. (pp.70/71)

There is peace at the banquet not because nothing is happening but because people are reconciled, accepted sufficiently to relate to each other in love, gift and enjoyment. They are at home with each other and their host; they are at peace and they are *making* peace. But the food at the messianic feast, the supply of nourishment which makes it possible, is the love and welcome of the host...Our peace is only authentic, it seems, when the world's peace has been broken, exposed as false; when the passive consensus favoured by Caiaphas has been so upset that it brings out its latent violence against whatever disturbs it. Jesus' peace can only happen when such a crisis has been provoked. His own uneasiness, unpeacefulness, is a kind of persistent questioning, just how much of the truth can the world bear without arming itself? Can the world, the orderly society of occupied Palestine, 'contain' the announcement of a final compassion which confuses all barriers of purity and probity? Can this society be a *catholic* society? (pp.71/72)

Perhaps the test of a society's health from the Christian point of view is how well it can continue to live with and listen to (not just to tolerate) such a critical presence. For the Church, like its Lord, proclaims God's peace best when least preoccupied with maintaining a bland consensus with society, when it is most ready to be uneasy and constructively suspicious...It gathers together round the Eucharistic table to hold together the present realities of struggle and breakage, and the hope of the Kingdom where we shall seriously, affirmingly and joyfully look each other in the face, at peace in Jerusalem. And again, we gather to recognise the way in which the struggle runs through us; in penitence, we look at our own refusals to be catholic, we bring to the surface our own resistance to grace...(p.72)

This is where we must turn back to the figure of Jesus and ask again what 'his' peace might mean. We can recognise that the peace of his Kingdom is an active love which upsets the illusory peace of the present order; but what of Jesus' peace? He was an unpeaceful man in terms of the circumstances of his life and death, an unpeaceful man too in the sense that he evidently suffered from the constraints of his mission and its consequences. It is only a kind of evasive sentimental religiosity that comes to speak of peace in relation to his person - 'My peace I give you'? (p.75)

The New Testament writers are not as a rule given to religious cliches where the person of Jesus is concerned, and they do not forget the irreducible elements of conflict in the experience of Jesus. Later theology unashamedly presses the paradox; Jesus was in constant possession of the vision of God, as fully as any human being could possess it, even at the moment when his soul experienced utter dereliction. He 'saw' God as he cried, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'. In him, it appears, the two worlds could co-exist. (pp.75/76)

Jesus does not achieve theoretical solution to the problem of how Kingdom and failure, future and present, hope and memory can be reconciled. He simply lives in both, the vividness of each, moment by moment, feeding the vividness of the other. He does so, the gospels suggest, because his life is given up, moment by moment to his Father. (pp.77/78)

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