

Nuances in Public Theology

KLC PAPERS | 1.3 | NOVEMBER 2020

A distinctive of good scholarship is that it attends to the nuances of life and our world. As we host public lectures and make them available in written and recorded versions we have thus called this series of lectures and recordings Nuances in Public Theology.

PLAUSIBILITY, PATIENCE AND PREPARATION: SCOUTING THE FUTURE

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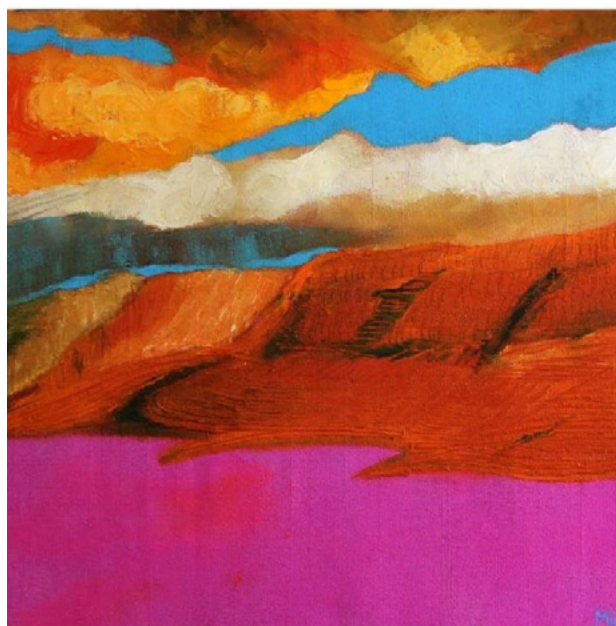
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Jubilee Centre's *Seeds of Change* Conference, November 20, 2020.

Abstract: George Weigel famously said of John Paul II that he scouted the future to guide the mission of the church. Prediction is a dangerous game, but the future will emerge from the present, and as best we can, we need to prepare for it. Central to such preparation will be embodying that answer which is Christ so that our words are heard, patiently living the solution until it is heeded and developing a depth analysis of our culture/s and their dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

It is a privilege to participate in this important week hosted by Jubilee Centre. The pandemic and its collateral damage have alerted us unequivocally that our common life together and how we do it matters. I am an African and in my homeland of South Africa and in other parts of Africa – think of Rwanda for example – we have learnt through bitter experience that our common life and healthy societal structures really do matter. When you stand by a river and watch 500 macheted corpses wash by each hour, you realise healthy governance, politics and community really do matter.



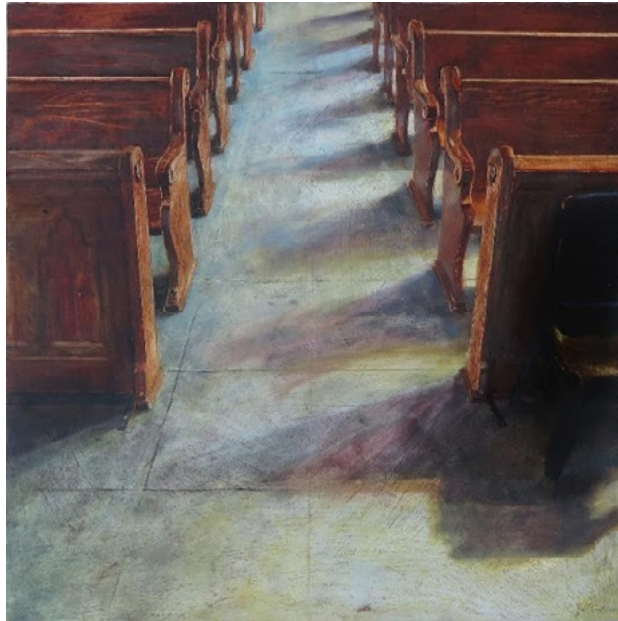
Ntobeko Mjijwa, *Purple River*

RETRIEVING THE BIBLICAL STORY

In the West we have enjoyed relative peace and affluence for some 75 years since the end of World War II. In such a context it is easy to take our comfort and security for granted and to assume that we can simply concentrate on our own, individual lives. If we are listening, the pandemic has driven a train through such a view. It similarly challenges to the core the sort of privatised Christianity that is so endemic in the West. Modernity privatised religion, and far too much Christianity has followed suit, reducing the Christian life to church attendance, private devotions and personal evangelism. Such Christianity has little or nothing to say to the culture. Church attendance, personal devotions and evangelism are vitally important, but they are part of a much bigger picture, and we denature them if we fail to situate them within that bigger context.

The main theme of Jesus' teaching is *the kingdom of God*, the recovery of God's reign over, and his purposes for, his entire creation. In Mark's Gospel a metaphor for becoming a Christian is entering the kingdom, the implication being that conversion brings us into God's kingdom purposes, the *missio Dei*, to being part of God's work to erase sin and evil and to bring the whole of the creation under his reign. This is why Jesus says of his followers that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Salt must be rubbed deeply into the culture if it is to hold back decay, and light is designed to illumine the darkness. If we are to contribute to the well-being of our culture/s then we will need to recover the grand, comprehensive story that the Bible tells, so that we can see how we are called to indwell that story today.

The NZ sociologist, John Carroll, argues that the church has signally failed to do this. In his *The Existential Jesus* Carroll argued that "The waning of Christianity in the West is easy to explain. The Christian churches have comprehensively failed to retell their foundation story in a way that might speak to the times." We urgently need to redress this failure. Few things would help us as much as if pastors, priests and preachers across the UK and beyond would take responsibility week in and week out for rehearsing the grand biblical story in myriad ways in word and ritual until it becomes, as it should be, the default mode of God's people.



Ydi Coetsee, *Untitled*

Then we would hear with crystal clarity God’s call to all of us, in Jeremiah’s memorable words, to seek the welfare of the city, to see its welfare in all areas, in church life to be sure, but also in politics, business, debt, unemployment, education, economics, civil society, in family life, in health care, and certainly amidst a pandemic. Centres like Jubilee and conferences like this would be inundated by pastors and Christians asking “How?”, how do we do this?

SCOUTING THE FUTURE

One answer is *to pay attention* to what is going on. The pandemic has exposed the cracks in our cultures, and we do well to attend to them to see if and how they can be healed. The pandemic is catastrophic but, as I have argued elsewhere, it is also an *invitation*. An invitation to reflect, to reflect on how we live, what kind of societies we inhabit and what kind of society we want to be if all are to flourish. Once the vaccines arrive the push will be to get back to “normal” asap, and so we need to use this window of invitation, as the Jubilee Centre is doing, to think hard about what is wrong with our societies, where the cracks are and what we might do about them.

In other words, we need a missional approach to contemporary culture. I have always been struck by George Weigel’s comment about John Paul II that he

scouted the future so that he could best guide the mission of the church. Of course, prediction is a dangerous activity. However, one thing we know is that the future will emerge from the present, and we do well to bring all our resources to bear on current trends and where they will or might lead so that we can be prepared for them. I suggest we are not very good at this. Take postmodernism, for example. It brought vital insights but also real dangers as everything, including truth and justice, became relativised. History contains an abyss of monsters that we do not want to unleash. Gertrude Himmelfarb notes that whereas previously we were wary of the abyss, postmoderns play around it, a very dangerous strategy. There is a line, I suggest, between the wild pluralism of postmodernism and the fake news that is now proving a real danger to democracies such as the US. Especially when you are facing a pandemic, “alternative facts” can be a matter of life and death. Why can’t we just ignore the pandemic – if we say it will go away then will it not just do so? All of this is, I propose, relatively easily extrapolated from the relativism embodied in postmodernism, yet, did we scout that future?

What Jubilee is doing is very important. But will anyone listen? My hunch is that once the vaccines arrive there will be a rush to return to life as “normal.” Most of us will manifest an astonishing capacity to move on and to forget. Thus, if we are concerned to scout the future, we need to think about what is likely to happen if the invitation of the pandemic is not heeded! I have read the Jubilee Task Force papers with interest and been instructed by them. They attend to the cracks. But what will happen if our societies as a whole ignore them in the rush to get back to life as we knew it? As far as we can we need to scout the future to prepare for possible outcomes.

LIVING THE SOLUTION

By next year it is likely that the pandemic will be defeated, life as usual will start to resume and our seeds of change may be quietly ignored. What then? In Lewis Mumford’s fascinating history of the city in the West he tells of the time when Rome was close to collapse. It suffered from elephantiasis - being badly overextended – cf. David McIlroy’s paper, torture had become its entertainment, and it was close to collapse. Where, asks Mumford, was the solution to be found? Astonishingly, he points out that the micro solution was quietly being lived in the

monasteries and in the Middle Ages it would become the macro solution. Here, I suggest, is an important word for us.



Zak Benjamin, *Kerkie*

The cracks the pandemic has exposed will not go away. We will probably try to ignore them, but they are there and if not attended to will only deteriorate. What are we to do? We are to wait, but not passively. In our own lives and communally we need to get on with developing and living the solution so that when it is required, our seeds have been nurtured into full-grown plants and are ready to be dispensed. Yes, we need a reset, and it will be wonderful if Jubilee's seeds of change are widely embraced. Let us pray and work to this end. But if not, let us embrace them, let us water them, knowing that their time will come.

If the voice of Christians is to be heard, then we need to live plausible lives, lives that create a plausibility structure against which our words cannot be dismissed. Our seeds of change need to take root firstly in our own lives. We need initiatives in business, health care, law, politics, family life, etc., that embody the solution. And we need deep, well-researched, well-honed, relevant ideas about how to heal our culture for the benefit of all. There is a great task upon us. And do remember that while ideas are vital, indispensable seeds of change, ideas alone will not suffice. We need a riot of song, lament, dance, poetry, literature, sculpture, economic, political and legal analysis, which is so penetrating, moving and attractive that it cannot be ignored.

May the Spirit water the seeds sown this week.

Works Referred to:

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