

REFLECTION

During these strange times of having to spend so much extra time with those in one's own household, my wife Janeen and I have been doing a lot of reading. There is one book which we read aloud to each other which I want to share with you. It is by the historian Tom Holland, called "DOMINION The making of the Western Mind".

What's remarkable about this book is that I think Tom Holland "got it", that is to say he discerned the key thing about the message of the Gospel: that it is not

- * domination as power over others, external controls or manipulation of peoples' minds or morality which counts
- * but rather the leavening of love, service, the paradoxical way of the cross in its apparent weakness able to expose the dehumanising powers which like to think that they have the power of life and death over others.

Holland proposes that the instrument of terror called crucifixion (remember that the roads to Rome were lined with the rotting bodies of corpses to remind all of their fate if they dared questioned Roman rule), the cross became the very symbol of the new way of Jesus freeing all from the bondages of both oppression and the inner imprisonments of the mind. In the cross the very purposes of God are revealed. This once tiny group of Jewish dissidents by disavowing violence, exemplified the radical idea that the whole human race is chosen to be the object of grace and was able within two centuries to sweep away the old mythologies which at their core assumed that it is the powerful (masquerading as Divine) who determine the fate of human beings and their societies.

Holland in his broad sweep of history weaves this theme and its influence without papering over the most appalling and gruesome instances when the symbol of the cross was hijacked and equated with a sword designed to kill rather than the symbol of compassion, the liberation of peoples' minds and the pathway to peace and justice. All the way through, Holland charts historical moments when the alternative way of the cross influenced the course of events leading to the acceptance of diversity, of liberation, of justice and the intrinsic value of all human beings.

Today we heard stories (parables) about the new social order called the Kingdom of Heaven in which little and insignificant things and their unexpected workings are able to bring about transformations which are signs of this new order of peace and justice. These days I prefer to call the Kingdom of Heaven as the "other world" in the midst of this world, an "otherness" grounded in valuing people who live the blessedness of the beatitudes - an otherness which lives the truth that all people are of one blood. One of Holland's historical vignettes particularly moved me.

In 1718 Quakers, Benjamin and Sarah Lay sailed to the Caribbean, to Barbados which was renowned for being a "Babel of all Nations and Conditions of men". Many Quakers were there and they expected to be amongst those who were open to the leading of the spirit. They stood out - little, both were hunchbacks, barely 4 feet tall.



Lay, despite having legs 'so slender, as to appear almost unequal to the task of supporting him' had already personally lobbied the British king about policies in the middle east.

One day visiting another Quaker family, Sarah was shocked to find a slave, naked and bleeding hanging from a tree. Even some Quakers did not think that “in Christ there is neither slave nor free” meant that slavery as such was against the will of God. The Lays though needed no scriptural justification for their abhorrence of slavery - it was of the very Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ that slavery was of the devil. They opened their house to be a sanctuary for runaway slaves and made themselves so unpopular for denouncing slavery that they were forced to leave Barbados.

In 1731 they moved to the renowned city of brotherly love, Philadelphia, where they intensified their opposition to slavery with little success. After Sarah’s death, Benjamin mourned her passing by pushing his activism to a new level and got banned from the Quaker Meeting Hall. He then pulled off his most spectacular publicity stunt. “Called to address fellow Quakers, he rose to his feet, smoothed back his coat, and drew out a sword that he had concealed among its folds. The enslavement of Africans he declared, in a resounding voice was as ‘justifiable in the sight of the Almighty, who beholds and respects all nations and colours of men with equal regard, as if you should thrust a sword through their hearts as I do with this book’. Then, holding up a hollowed-out Bible in which he had concealed a bladder full of blood-red pokeberry juice, he ran it through. The juice splattered everywhere. The meeting hall erupted in indignation. Lay, turning on his heel, hobbled out. He had made his point.”

Never once did Lay despair of the notion that society needed to be reborn again, *Flesh gives birth to flesh but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit*. 20 years after he had gate-

crashed the annual assembly of the Philadelphia Friends, as he lay mortally sick in bed, he was brought the news that a new assembly had voted to discipline any Quaker who traded in slaves. “I can now die in peace” he sighed in relief. His progress through life, for all its discouragements, for all the dismal stories that had beset him round, for all the hobgoblins and found fiends that had sought to daunt his spirit, he had never turned aside from his one object. Benjamin Lay had succeeded, by the time of this death in 1759, in making the community in which he had lived just a little bit more like him - in making it just that little bit more progressive. And eventually slavery was banned across the world because it was against all human rights.



Now let’s come back to our Gospel passage. The parables weave together 3 themes - *being taken for granted* and *universality*.

First the **mustard seed** sown in the field, so very small it grows into a big "tree" a marvellous transformation. And what happens? Birds nest there. It’s like a miracle. *From little things big things grow* - as with all babies! What were mustard seeds used for? For cooking they jump all uncontrollably over the place! But so much is added to the taste!

Incidentally, I once discovered a dark side to mustard seeds at the Venice Biennale in 1995. Because their properties never vary despite place or temperature they were used for the exact measure of cranial (brain) capacity by proponents of eugenics for pseudo-scientific purposes trying to demonstrate the superiority of white human beings! Appalling!

The tree and the field are universal images - the field is the world and the tree "provided food for all". But there is an

anti-triumphal twist. The seed so small hidden in the ground does its work mysteriously and out-of-sight. Something taken for granted is the catalyst for the transformative way of self-giving love when people are awakened to just how much they are valued and loved. Then they are miraculously changed and the divine purpose works its way in the world often through suffering, weakness, vulnerability. Again, it is the paradox of the "the Cross".

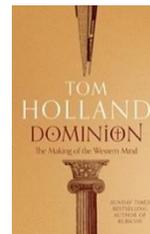
This prepares us for the stunning **parable of the leaven**. The first surprise is that the divine figure is a woman. The second surprise is the amount of leaven. It took 500 grams of leaven to make over 450 kilograms of bread! The third surprise is the negative image that leaven had in Jesus' day, regarded to be corrupting like "one rotten apple can spoil the whole barrel". Like leaven, those regarded as the least in the world were so often the special focus of Jesus and were the first recipients of his message. And they went on to be the leaven which transformed the Roman world.

Benjamin and Sarah Lay too were like the yeast of universal compassion which eventually led to the anti-slavery movement as the consciences of evangelicals were soon pricked enough to declare that the institution of slavery was against the will of God. What is it for us today?

Incidentally Holland makes the point that the catalytic moment which changed the mind of the ruler of the Ottoman empire about the evils of slavery when he was told it was "a crime against humanity" - a term first coined in 1842 by an American diplomat. Thus it was not by seeking justification in religious texts such as the Koran or

Bible where slavery is largely taken for granted - but in the yeast of the idea that it was "a crime against humanity" That is how yeast works. It disappears into the loaf, suffuses it entirely, and puffs up little pockets of carbon dioxide so the leaven becomes so thoroughly a part of the loaf that it can no longer be detected, yet it completely animates the whole - again universality.

Finally, I invite you to explore the other parables each with its own imagery demonstrating the "otherness" of the order based on self-giving and compassion for all. **The parable about buying the farm** proposes that the treasure of the "other world" has there all along but hidden. You mean that each of us is precious as is all humanity is something which can be hidden? Often yes! Even the disciples at times were those who did not "get it". The other parables: the pearl of great price, the net and the householder who threw out both new and old all illustrate the strange reality of the "other world" which requires a decision in order to grasp and live it, that is when you "get it".



As I said at the beginning, I think Tom Holland "got it". He discerned the key thing about the message of the Gospel; that it is not domination over others, external controls or manipulation of peoples' minds or even morality which counts, but rather the leavening of love, self-giving and the way of the cross which in its apparent weakness is able to expose the dehumanising powers which think they have the power of life and death over others.

And for each one of us the blessedness of life in its all fullness - are you ready to say yes to it again?