

John Crossan and a Historical Approach to Biblical Faith

Will Cardwell, July 28, 2019

Shaykh Rashid in his wonderful eulogy yesterday gave me courage. At David's amazing memorial service there at Snidow Chapel, he said that he was speaking to us and to David who "was among the angels there". I believe those angels are among us here too – to help me speak. I told Dan that I would speak if there were not others clamoring to speak more than I. Bev used to say that when the church is really being the church, people will be clamoring to speak. I didn't clamor but I do have enthusiasm for some ideas I have been studying from John Dominic Crossan. Crossan has fed my fascination for exploring Biblical Faith using the academically disciplined study of History as the controlling perspective.

David always preached from the week's lectionary readings. When Dan asked me what scripture to include today, I asked him to pick from the lectionary – that was in David's honor, but unfortunately I am not using them explicitly today. That would have been too hard and not specifically what I was ready to talk about - though I am sure David would made today's Lectionary speak directly to us now if he were here.

I am not generally drawn into scholarly works, but I was intrigued by the 1998 PBS Frontline documentary "From Jesus to Christ" which I video-cast for some of you in the Lodge recently. In the past year I have dug into a book by Dr. Crossan as one of the better known scholars producing that documentary. That book, "How to Read the Bible and Still be a Christian", has this teaser question on the cover: "Is God Violent? An

Exploration from Genesis to Revelation”. The book was signed for me by Dr. Crossan when Dolly and I heard him speak in North Carolina on March 23rd of last year. “Dominic”, as he modestly signed my book, was born in 1934 in Ireland, and after Boarding School joined a Catholic religious order and moved to the U S. He was ordained as a priest, earned a Doctorate of Divinity, traveled extensively and studied Biblical languages, theology and archeology in prestigious settings. In 1969, Dr. Crossan resigned as a priest, married and joined the faculty of De Paul University where he served for 26 years teaching comparative religions. Since retiring he continues to write and lecture. He has written some 35 books and is a gentle but regularly outspoken man of Faith. He has said that there has never been any conflict between theology and the study of the history for him. Spoiler alert: I will now answer the book’s teaser question “Is God violent?” The answer is ...”no”.

For years I was a little fearful of delving into the work of what was called the “Jesus Seminar” people, the scholars who tried to look objectively into history and archeology, in search of the “historical Jesus”. Suppose this material made me become an “atheist”, I thought. Those loaded thoughts reacting with my conservative Southern Baptist upbringing were scary. Today, those thoughts would not scare Bev or David if they were alive, and certainly don’t seem to scare Dan. In fact the Jesus Seminar people, of whom Crossan is probably the best known, really complement my Church of the Covenant experience. We have never had a heavy doctrinal focus here. There has been an openness that left room for my mind to go to adventurous places, places that Bev, David, Dan and others in our church may have already been. I now appreciate so much better the

metaphors and parables that enrich theology - as well as - the historical, archeological and historical scholarship, all creating a rich biblical Faith. I believe Crossan and his colleagues show us this. Crossan says that we need to understand the *matrix* of the time, place, political settings, in which events occurred - context that is so important, you can't leave it out – to understand the Bible. For me, this objective historical matrix or context of events makes the Faith more strongly rooted.

So, contrary to making me doubt the Christian Faith I was raised on and practice, the history has enhanced my faith and beliefs. It is so interesting and challenging to me, that I would be excited if a few others would join me sometime in a book group study of, say, a Crossan book or similar. Let me know if you have interest so I can gauge that possibility. I have time to only bring a sampling of this book today. Over the time Crossan has spoken in protestant churches, been on panels in debates etc. he has had many and recurring questions about his theses as maybe you will have today: “If God is non-violent, what about Jesus and the whip of chords in the temple?”, “what about this, what about that?” His answers that I have heard usually draw on what he calls “scholarly consensus” that rings true to me, answers that honor science and come out of a deep knowledge of the “matrix” of contextual elements. Yet for me, his views, views that don't assume supernatural phenomena, enhance the traditions, metaphors and deep Faith practices that have been so affirming and life-giving to people over the centuries, people who practice a life of Biblical Faith.

Now I will share a few ideas I have gleaned from this particular book by Crossan. If I say something wrong, it is my attempts at summarization, not Dr. Crossan, that is the problem.

In the broad context of the eras of mans existence on earth, entering the Bronze age around 3,000 BC, our problems began with the transition from hunting and gathering to farming. We were fine without owning property. The Sumerian people who emerged in Mesopotamia had a written language, cuneiform, and left us a history of their cities that grew up as a result of their ability to thrive staying in one place and growing their own food. It was an easier life than being a nomad and you wanted to preserve and enlarge the land you owned and learned to cultivate. And you wanted to pass it on to your offsprings. You want to own it and pass it on to your offspring. The norm of civilization was becoming to hold on to your “possessions”. Violence and brutality resulted from protecting what was “yours”. People of these emerging nation-states accepted eventual Imperialism and “winning” the wars against tribes who coveted your expanding lands was how you made peace and it favored the gods.

Of course, it was imperialism – concentration of power and privilege that is seen to be what was emerging as the norm of civilization, that escalated into wars, not farming per se in later civilization context where farming is at the center of justice in producing food for equitable distribution. Crossan in several other writings explores the question of whether violence and imperialism is the norm of civilization itself; Can mankind break the cycle by being civil without violence?

Beginning around 2000 BC, Israel, the people of one god, and the people of covenants with that god, were *radicals*. Their radical God stood for distributive justice, that is, equitable distribution of goods for all. We have this radical covenant from God recorded in Leviticus 25:23:

“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants”.

This is a radical god speaking, not the normalcy of civilization. It is still radical. Israel found ways to circumvent this radical idea. The year of Jubilee which was the returning of property to the original owners every 50th year, was to relieve the situation but the Israelites eventually managed to circumvent this too.

This idea of God owning the land is a key assertion of God. Crossan calls it the basis for distributive justice, justice in the distribution of the earth’s resources. Israel’s covenants with God were first written with long statements of thanksgiving and praise of God’s love and care for Israel and therefore the *requirement* part of a covenant was just natural response to a loving God. The penalty for not obeying was a short part of the covenant and was no worse than proportionate to the offence. As time went by, the thanksgiving part of covenants became shorter and the retribution or penalty part longer and more violent.

Crossan shows cycles of assertion and subversion escalating through the Bible, from farmer Cain killing hunter Able, on and on ending with the climactic violence in Revelation – the Christ of the Bible (not the historic Jesus) riding the great white horse to vanquish the bad people. “Look to the middle” of the Bible for focus Crossan suggests – the historical Jesus making a non-

violent demonstration for distributive justice – not retributive justice or Imperial retribution – The Jew, Jesus, riding on a mere donkey in that last week of his life...– a non-violent mockery of Rome’s Imperial violence and their well to do collaborators.

Recently I emailed to some of you this great quote I liked from John Dominic Crossan’s, "How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian", p 201. Here it is:

"Finally, as we saw with the historical Jesus in Chapters 9-11 and will see again with the historical Paul in Chapters 12-14, beneath that seismic conflict of Christian Judaism and Roman Imperialism was the grinding collision of history's two great tectonic plates; the normalcy of civilization's program of peace through victory against the radicality of God's program of peace through justice."

What really seemed to have happened - the scholarly best consensus of the historical matrix of events, apart from the wonderful theology and metaphors arising over 6000 years leaves us challenged, I think, as never before: From reading Crossan I believe that that martyred Nazarian, the historical Jesus, whom Crossan calls “the norm and criterion of the biblical Christ” still calls us to love as reflected in the Beatitudes - and to doing justice in the distribution of goods. That is the challenge I see - in our church’s context. Will I do the work that a radical God calls me to *join him* in, not just waiting for God to do something on his own - Will I commit to the inward and outward journey of using my gifts to join him in the radical work of love and justice?