

## THEOLOGICAL MODELS FOR PRISON CHAPLAINCY

---

by Terry Nowell

This paper explores theological models for prison chaplaincy as offered in

*Strenuous Commands* by A E Harvey and

*Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* by B Chilton and J McDonald.

**Strenuous Commands** tries to find whether there is a distinctive ethic of Jesus. If an ethic is defined as an ethos, a pattern of life or moral inspiration, then the answer is yes. But if ethic is defined as a set of moral standards then it is not so easy to answer. There is more moral instruction to be found in the epistles than in the gospels. It is possible to find many parallels with the teaching of Jesus in contemporary Jewish and pagan literature. Perhaps, then, it is not so much moral values as motivation which sets apart the teaching of Jesus. In searching for the ethic of Jesus, Harvey compares the teaching of Jesus, as far as it can be traced back to him, with other examples of the way in which moral education was undertaken in the ancient world, and asks what response the teaching of Jesus would have been expected to elicit from its hearers.

Having examined the Sermon on the Mount, the author also looks for the style of Jesus in this passage and finds four general characteristics. Jesus uses specific illustrations for general application; the emphasis comes through exaggeration - it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven; he appeals to good sense - it is what a wise man does; and he encourages autonomy - there is no argument or explanation, simply an assertion.

It is in chapter 5 that the writer concentrates on the Strenuous Commands of Jesus, framed in the imperative, a style that is not often used elsewhere. The author lists four Strenuous Commands.

The first is that of non-retaliation. The *lex talionis* is cited where it is required that only the exact compensation for the hurt inflicted should be returned and no more. Non-retaliation also brings with it an imperative - hearers are

exhorted not to stand on their rights even when their assailant is evil. Because the ability to lend was seen as a blessing as well as a duty, we are to lend, expecting nothing in return.

The next command is Love Your Enemies. The love of neighbour lies at the heart of the *Torah*, the Jewish law, but this is not a law in the literal sense rather a principle to help interpret other laws. The command to love our enemies covers a widespread moral attitude but Jesus makes it an extreme case - he talks of Samaritans, Gentiles and foreigners, and not just other Jews. Jesus is also calling for a higher morality than that shown by the heathen and the tax collectors - there is the telling example of how Jesus treated his enemies, those who opposed him, plotted against him, betrayed him and killed him by asking 'Father forgive them'.

This command appeals not to our good sense or to our religious motivation but rather to the potential that lies within each of us that can be activated only by the challenge of a command that is totally unconditional. It is also an injunction to imitate God.

The third command is not to judge or condemn. We must not take God's law into our own hands and condemning is incompatible with loving one's enemies. We are to forgive so that God can forgive.

The fourth strenuous command is the Golden Rule. Jesus uses the positive form of 'do to others as you wish them to do to you'. From the fourth century BC at least it had been well known in its negative form - 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour'. This is an appeal to common sense, needing no argument to support it, and I feel less of a strenuous command than the other three.

In the Sermon on the Mount, imperatives dominate - 'Do not.....', but there are also indicatives - 'No man can.....'. All the teachings seem to assume that they cannot be carried out in the world as it is at the present - they are conditions as they will be in the Kingdom. Because the Kingdom is at hand, the old teachings are being superseded by the teachings of Jesus.

Here is the key to the book: Jesus wants people to act as if the Kingdom is at hand, so the secret of our understanding and practise of the ethic of Jesus is that we should begin to act as if the Kingdom is here.

There is a double reference to the Kingdom of God. God is King, here and now. God will be fully King only when a different state of affairs obtains on earth. It is a statement of a present reality but it also implies a promise for the future.

Is there a distinctive ethic of Jesus? Like the author I find it impossible to answer. Jesus uses traditional forms for his teaching but also gives new maxims for a state of emergency - the strenuous commands engage with the proclamation of the Kingdom. His followers must be prepared for a profound change in their life style. He challenges us to live as if the Kingdom was already a reality.

I found studying this book helpful and yet challenging. It made me re-examine the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in a systematic way that I had never undertaken before. In particular, the strenuous commands of not retaliating; loving one's enemies; not judging; and doing to others what we would like them to do to us, are commands that allow no conditions.

How am I to live in my work as a chaplain as if the Kingdom were a present reality? I must question all that is done in prison - for not retaliating, loving enemies, not judging, are all contrary to what I find in the prison system. Yet do those in prison understand that the Kingdom is a present reality? There must be a proclamation of the Kingdom, a calling to recognise the Kingdom, before the commands can operate. The commands of Jesus cause me to question all my normal assumptions about my calling as a Christian, the priorities I should minister to, the responsibilities I must bear. I turn to the words of G K Chesterton:

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting:  
it has been found difficult, and left untried.

*(G.K. Chesterton, What's Wrong with the World)*

**Jesus and the Ethic of the Kingdom** also asks how the ethical teaching of Jesus can be reconciled with the preaching of the Kingdom.

Although Jesus is often seen as a teacher of morality - an ethic of love is at the heart of his teaching - love God and your neighbour, the authors contend that it is God's rule, and not the concept of love, that is at the heart of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus teaches repentance in the face of God's imminent action - the parables often have an eschatological crisis in them. So if the world is ending, why the emphasis on ethics? Because both eschatology and ethics face us with a decision.

The Kingdom is a decision for the future that is already taken so that the impact of the Kingdom must have immediate effect - so he gave a call to repentance. Yet there is also a recognisable social order that results from the Kingdom, otherwise the teaching about anxiety and possessions is of no value. They lose their impact if the present age is about to dissolve.

Thus the ethics of Jesus involve a co-operative response to the Kingdom in the expectation that its ultimate disclosure is near. The ethics are expressed by parables, a form used by contemporaries of Jesus also. The nature of God becomes a programme for humanity: be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect. A loving King requires loving subjects. So repentance, a turning back to that which alone has value, is a necessary and inescapable aspect of entering the Kingdom.

Chapter 3 looks more closely at the Theology of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is understood as dynamic strength, active intervention. It is not a geographical connotation, or abstract reign, rule, sovereignty or lordship. It affects lives, inviting people to join in responding to God's incursion in their lives.

A series of cameos is employed to describe the concept of 'Kingdom' in Israel's symbolic world and that of Jesus. They begin with a creation theology. Yahweh the King is creator of the universe and the victor over chaos. So the Kingdom does not originate in human agents, and the kings of Israel came into being as the anointed of Yahweh. Even so, we need to ask whether the sovereignty of Yahweh can find expression through human dynastic rule?

The King of the creation and the covenant breaks into the world of his people in judgement against the establishment - there is a divine requirement for justice and righteousness. Judgement comes through Assyria and Babylon and leads to an expectation of the priestly king, the Messiah. Here are pictures of a Kingdom which is dynamic, always exploding into meaning and creating new possibilities.

In the world of Jesus, there is the prelude of John's ministry with its triple test of messianic times - water, wind and fire. In Jesus, the Kingdom intersects time and its motifs of preaching and teaching are seen. Jesus brings the Kingdom within our reach.

Yet at the same time there is the mystery of the Kingdom: it is a mystery conveyed in parables. The parables articulate a reality that can be discerned, encountered and responded to in the midst of life. But the parables are

more than a teaching method - they are a challenge, a demand for reflection, shaking us out of our complacency. So Jesus is the catalyst of interaction between people and the Kingdom. It is for us to make a decision, a response.

The Kingdom intersects history and experience and brings a double sensitivity - to the dynamic, transcendent Kingdom, and the empirical situation to God and to neighbour. Entry into the Kingdom is further explored in the episodes relating to children. In the Child in the Midst in Mark 9:33-37, we are instructed to receive a child as if he were Jesus himself. True vocation is not in power or status but in obedient service to God as King. When Jesus blesses the children in Mark 10:13-16 there is a requirement to turn and change course by becoming like children - no human qualities bring entrance to the Kingdom, it is a response now. In the child there is a powerful image set before us of the need to jettison false values and also the potential future in the Kingdom. The child also brings shades of a servant - the opposite of power, status and domination. This is not a sentimentality about children but a statement about those of humble status being accepted into the Kingdom.

Encountering the Kingdom in this way brings liberation and obedience. Liberation is good news for the poor, the poor in spirit, a liberation from the false security of wealth, and a liberation for discipleship and new obedience. The focus of this new obedience is to love God and to love one's neighbour. There is to be a total response to God with no half measures. It is not so much that love is being commanded but rather that in God's service we find a perfect freedom to be open to God and to our neighbours.

Although the Kingdom is not of this world, its presence challenges all worldly power-systems, which includes the world of prisons. Love of our enemies becomes a strategy for the Kingdom. The faith-community will meet with persecution, and it must radiate shalom, blessing not cursing. So love of enemies is seen in the context of mission: the ultimate object is to win over the one from whom you are alienated. The issue is not victory over the enemy but victory to the Kingdom.

If Jesus is a liberationist whose ministry gave expression to the praxis of the Kingdom, then his work is a counter-force directed at all oppressive forces, spiritual and material. His very presence expresses the challenge of the Kingdom and was bound to bring flash-points with the Jewish tradition - the symbols of king, priest, temple and prophet.

The final chapter of the book examines the notion of performance, its usefulness and its limitations, as a means of describing Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom either using motifs or themes.

In performing motifs, metaphors are used to set before the hearers a narrative which asks for a decision either for or against the possibility that is conveyed in the metaphor.

In the performance of themes, ethical themes, Jesus calls for a human action in response to divine action. There is now added the notion of performance as sign. Authentic signs are performed in response to the dynamic of the Kingdom and in response to human need. They are performed in demonstration of the Kingdom and as an invitation or summons to respond in repentance and faith, as in the episodes relating to children.

The performance of the Kingdom takes place within cultural structures in a given society, bringing transcendent perspectives into those structures. Those perspectives pose undermining questions for those societies which follow materialistic goals and pursue power as a primary aim.

What has the Kingdom to say to the power structure within a prison? A prison only functions with the goodwill of the officers and the inmates - if either withdraws its co-operation, then there is a breakdown. And what does the Kingdom say about chaplaincy? The performance of the Kingdom as seen in the ministry of Jesus brought into being a new kind of community, aimed at ministry and service, enacting God's Kingdom on earth. How can that vision of the Kingdom be brought into being in a prison?

I found studying this book difficult, not least because of the complexity of its writing and argument. In the space of 131 pages it cites many other writers and to begin to grapple with all their themes is almost impossible. I was challenged by the chapter of 'The Kingdom and the kingdoms' which sets forward the paradox that the Kingdom is not of this world, yet its presence challenges all worldly power-systems, prisons included. Love of enemy is a key strategy in the Kingdom: following Jesus brings the paradox of liberation for discipleship yet obedience to his teaching.

## Bibliography

Harvey, Anthony E *Strenuous Commands*. London: SCM Press, 1990.

Chilton, Bruce & McDonald, J I H *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom*. London: SPCK, 1987.

*Terry Nowell has worked as a Methodist Minister in Derbyshire, Lincoln and Nottingham. Having previously served in Lincoln as part-time chaplain to the prison, he has again taken up that work, since retiring from fulltime ministry.*

*He was appointed as editor to Justice Reflections in March 2007.*

*He can be contacted at [terry@nowell-family.me.uk](mailto:terry@nowell-family.me.uk)*