

Maturity

Readings: I Samuel 15, 34 – 16, 13: Samuel anoints David. Mark 4, 26 – 34: seeds – and a mustard bush.

Today in Mark's Gospel, we look again at the roots of early Christianity, prior to its makeover by Greek thinking, when it acquired all the classic creeds and doctrines; then its total transformation by Constantine, who turned it into a tool of the Roman emperor – a tool for power and control.

Look around and you will see that a church, like most organisations, has a youth, then a very active mature phase, followed by a somewhat quieter life. Nevertheless, there are always things we can do; there is always something ahead. Our Gospel reading described Christianity as a whole in its establishment phase: thousands of tiny seeds; hundreds of birds: growth and life in all its youthful exuberance. But today, Christianity is two thousand years mature, and declining in its influence and power – even though some bits of it, and some other faiths, are at other stages of youth, immaturity, or very active life. It is my contention today that the only kind of faith that is of positive value as our fossil fuelled culture evolves into what Thomas Berry called the "Ecozoic" era, is the mature kind. A faith that still teaches it is the only valid one will go head to head in our world with others that teach the same – and that's no recipe for working together as we must on today's global issues – it's a recipe for conflict.

People immersed in fundamentalist faith usually manage well in isolation, but when numbers of them come to live in a liberal democracy, there can be real trouble. That has happened in Europe, where liberal societies have opened their doors to migrants from the East, a few of whom have a very narrow understanding of their faith, and will resort to extreme violence to promote it. Karl Popper wrote:

*If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend the tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them."*¹

Popper's words are coming true in our time. The liberal democracies are becoming less liberal. The American NSA has become a multi-billion dollar spy enterprise, as Edward Snowden has shown. Sheldon Wolin, a famous American political science professor, describes how genuine opposition gets called "subversion." How the hierarchical structure of corporations gets transferred to the state, and how nationalism, and patriotism are whipped up – as is happening in China on a huge scale (It's been strong in the USA for decades.) Those in control like it. It's a great distraction – along with sport and infotainment – while they get on with running the show in their own interests.

Democracy, Professor Wolin says, should embody the sensitive hopes of ordinary people in terms of the present and future that they want. But, he adds, we have it subordinated to the so-called demands of economic growth. Last week I mentioned Naomi Klein's book, "This Changes Everything." She shows the need to get off the economic growth bandwagon on our finite planet. Our task as people of mature faith, is to show that there are other ways to grow, other dimensions of growth that can moderate and balance our stewardship and our life together.

Elizabet Sahtouris² is an evolutionary biologist. She, following James Lovelock's Gaia Theory, shows a highly sophisticated evolutionary process. The universe is alive – its intelligent processes are self-creating living systems: the earth is just as alive as the creatures of the earth. Darwin, she points out, saw things as being in competition: survival of the fittest – that's how things are in their establishment phase. This competitive analysis appealed to capitalists in the west, but another biologist from Russia saw it differently. His name was Kropotkin, and his book "Mutual Aid" was about co-operation in evolution. Today, biologists see that nature does both: That there is an evolution cycle, beginning with unity, then

¹ From "The Open Society and its Enemies", Routledge, 1945

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1mv12hEzIA>

individuation with tensions and conflicts – the Darwinian stage – followed by the Kropotkinian phase – we see it in the rain forests, the coral reefs, the prairies. It's cheaper to feed your enemies than to kill them. Then you have no enemies, you can co-operate and do new things. Creative co-operation is the mature stage of evolution. It is also the mature stage of religion.

For two billion years, the archaea were the only life on earth. They learned to trade DNA information, learned to get together in the huge co-operative cell – they learned all that without benefit of brain. The big nucleated cell then went through the same cycle – in competition at first, then forming co-operative systems – plants and animals. Right at the very end of this process came a big-brained experiment: that's us. The results of this experiment are not in yet – we've only been around for a hundred thousand years or so.

Through that time, our forebears moved into the mature phase of evolution – they had to: living with and understanding the big game animals that swarmed around them. Today, many indigenous peoples have not lost that mature connection with their world. But then came the empire building experiment, based on urbanisation, and agriculture, developed over the last 6,000 years. With it, we're back in the juvenile conflict/competitive phase of evolution.

Today, we have brought about the end game of this evolutionary stage. We have to learn again how to follow nature, moving to a co-operative society, but this time, on a global scale. We need to recover the spiritual respect for nature and her processes that many indigenous peoples have never lost. We must become a desert-greening species. That is not hard. We know how to do it, but we don't because there's not much in it for corporate profits. We need to remember that the Stone Age didn't end because they ran out of stones. So we don't have to wait until we run out of fossil fuel before we end the fossil fuel age. We know organic agriculture outperforms hi-tech industrial agriculture: its more productive, more nutritious, and more sustainable. A deep change is indicated: spiritual, economic, and mature.

Religion and spirituality must again become an intrinsic part of our understanding of Gaia and Cosmos, and her life-giving, living, evolving processes. Can we help our culture recover such an understanding? Join in Gaia's dance? I think so. What should we do, then? "Do what makes your heart sing to build a better world."