

Can the Eagle and the Dove Fly Together?

A Reflection on the Way of Jesus and a Nation's Imperial Designs

Matthew 5:38-48; Luke 4:6 – 21; Acts 1: 1-11; 2: 1-3

Richard A. Rhem

Lakeshore Interfaith Community, Mother's Trust

Ganges, Michigan

Memorial Day Weekend, May 24, 2009

Were we to celebrate Memorial Day on the date originally set for its observance – May 30 – rather than as we observe it in 2009, May 25, it would be followed immediately by the Festival of Pentecost which in 2009 is Sunday, May 31, a week from today. The conjunction of these two observances is not always in such close proximity since on the Christian calendar, Easter is a movable feast which means it is not tied to a specific date as was Memorial Day originally – May 30. A movable feast, as its name implies, moves to different dates; it falls in the western church on the Sunday following the paschal full moon, which is the full moon that falls on or after the vernal, or Spring, equinox. However, it occurs often enough around mid-April that over many years of setting up a preaching schedule and liturgical themes, I am acutely aware of the conjoining of the observance of Pentecost and Memorial Day.

Why do I say “acutely aware”? That takes me back quite a few years – one of those years when the Sunday service was Pentecost on the Christian Calendar and, the following day, the Memorial Day observance which, of course, would be observed in the church on the Sunday before – in this case, Pentecost Sunday.

Being considerably younger and a bit naïve, I assumed we should observe Pentecost, one of the major festivals of the Christian calendar – the observance we marked as the birthday of the Church. The Festival of the Holy Spirit was a lively celebration – the liturgical color was red and the people were encouraged to wear red apparel. The music was celebratory, often there were liturgical dancers and the whole service was upbeat. It was the culmination of the Christian year – a six-month remembering and rehearsal of the life of Jesus, the Anointed One, or the Christ.

My naiveté was revealed in the fact that I assumed such a full and rich observance of a high holy day ruled out any notice of the national observance of Memorial Day. That omission gave great offence to some and I heard about it. Even now, in my fading awareness in this the springtime of my senility, I remember the name and face of one dear woman who was deeply offended.

In all honesty, I was totally unaware that there might be such a reaction. It simply did not occur to me that the celebration of Pentecost in the Church should be wedded to a national celebration. But I'm a quick study. Ever after, when the two observances fell on the same weekend, Pentecost was central but Memorial Day got notice in the hymns – the National Hymn, for example, and in the prayers. I didn't want to face the wrath of the patriot again. I compromised.

I set this before you because it strikes me as a very great irony that a national holiday of remembrance of a nation's war dead should rival the celebration of one of the most significant days on the church calendar – the Festival of the Holy Spirit. The national symbol is the eagle; the symbol of the Spirit is the dove. I raise the question: can the eagle and the dove fly together? Or, perhaps, more fittingly, is there place in the religious community, in my case the Christian community, for the spirit of patriotism and nationalism?

To state the issue from another angle, how is it that the religion that issued from Jesus has become the majority religion of a nation bent on empire, on global domination?

How are empires created? Is it not finally by military power? How are empires perpetuated? Is it not by military power?

What marks empires during their time of dominance? Is it not fear? Aware always of any threat to that dominance, must not an empire be ever on the alert? Must it not be quick to recognize any challenge? Must it not scan the horizon for any rising power? Must it not keep its weapon systems up to date? Must it not be watchful of unrest anywhere that might explode into widespread conflagration?

Is it not an irony that a so-called Christian nation – though that claim should be challenged – should have imperial designs when the one we purportedly follow called his followers to love and not to fear. As one of the New Testament writers put it succinctly:

God is love.

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

This has been a trigger for much broader reflection on the relationship of religious vision and nationalism. In my religious faith commitment as a Christian, specifically as one who would follow the Way of Jesus, increasingly I see a great tension between American imperial designs and that Way to which Jesus beckons me.

It is really a luxury to be retired, not to have to worry about institutional concerns, about membership rolls or budget matters. I have been a "late bloomer" and that is probably a good thing because my ongoing – what I hope is a deepening – grasp of the Gospel – the Way of Jesus – creates a growing tension in me as an American citizen and a follower of Jesus.

That calls for clarification. Let me be clear; I do love this nation. I see the American experience as one of the great human achievements. I value our democratic values, our freedom, our constitutional vision and the rule of law. And I understand as well the emotional ties that bind us together in national vision and purpose.

I remember December 7, 1941. I had two brother-in-laws who fought in the Battle of the Bulge and I remember my sisters who lived at home writing their husbands every evening and watching anxiously for the mailman.

I remember the boyfriend of my youngest sister who was rejected for the draft because of a heart murmur and I remember he was depressed. My father told him he should be thankful but he regretted the fact that he could not enter the struggle for his country. I remember the flag that hung in the sanctuary of our church with a star for every serviceman. I remember celebrating in the street V-E Day and V-J Day.

I remember, too, the small flags in the windows of homes where a son or daughter was off to war and sometimes a gold star because a son or daughter had been killed in action.

I do have some sense of how all of that national emotional experience takes on an aura of the sacred. Deeply felt experience of national existence is similar it seems to deeply felt spiritual experience and I'm quite certain for most ardent observers of this national holiday there is no sense of it being in any way in tension with whatever religious faith they possess.

I hope that sets the context for that upon which I invite you to ponder with me – that is, the tension involved in being a follower of Jesus and being a citizen of an imperial power.

As I mentioned above, retirement is a luxury for one can set forth one's thinking honestly, without the trustees nervously suggesting that one might be jeopardizing the institution. But it is even more than that. In my present situation I have no desire to make points, to persuade, convince, convert. And, God knows, I don't feel compelled to be right, to win an argument. Were I really wise, I would love to be a sage – one who engages others in thoughtful discourse to raise awareness and enable another to think critically about issues and come to deeper understanding, thus enriching their humanity.

To set out the tension of the Kingdom of God as embodied in Jesus and Imperial America, I will suggest that for both the church and the nation there has been a serious shift from their founding vision. Let me begin with the Way of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospel, leading to the Pentecost moment, and, three hundred

years later, the establishment of the Christian religion as the official religion of the Empire in the days of Emperor Constantine.

The Way of Jesus set forth in the Gospels

Obviously I will be able to deal with only a very limited Gospel reference, but for our purpose here, I would suggest the references I have selected are critical passages. First, from the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew's Gospel:

Concerning Retaliation

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5: 38 – 48)

Without attempting an in-depth analysis of this "turning the other cheek" paragraph it is obvious that Jesus is calling his disciples to reject absolutely the principle of retaliatory violence. The next paragraph is a call to love one's enemies and pray for those who persecute one – the model being God who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain alike on the gardens of the righteous and on the unrighteous. With that as the Heavenly Parent's example, Jesus calls on his followers to act accordingly, thereby being perfect "as your heavenly Father is perfect."

That word "perfect" needs a word of explanation. The Greek word is *teleios* from *telos* which means "end." End can mean point of termination, cessation, the last part or conclusion. But it can also mean the end as a goal, or the purpose of something, the intention, the aim of an action, the outcome of an endeavor, the destiny which awaits. If one takes these lexical meanings, one might better translate *teleios* in this context as "mature". Then Jesus would be calling his followers to emulate God in living and acting maturely as God acts maturely, transcending our natural human responses in our human interactions.

I chose to cite Matthew rather than the same teaching from Luke's Gospel because Matthew changes the final call to emulate the heavenly Father from "merciful" to "perfect" or, as I am suggesting, "mature" or "whole". The source behind this teaching in both Matthew and Luke is a source called "Q" and the word in the "Q" source is the Greek word for "merciful." Luke keeps it; Matthew changes it and, for the point I am attempting to make, I resonate with the word *teleios* with the sense of maturity as the realizing of the end for which we were created – a realization that comes by loving, for love alone transforms the human being and the human situation. *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary on Matthew (Vol. VIII, p. 198) has, I believe, helpful comments on the paragraph.

Although not given on an institutional level (Jesus does not legislate for worldly courts) but for the private lives of disciples, these commands still have implications for the involvement of these private lives in the public and political decisions for which Christians are responsible. These sayings indicate that Jesus himself must have resisted the militaristic tendencies of those who opposed Rome and who finally plunged the nation into a catastrophic war (66-70 CE). In preserving these sayings and making them the climax of his antitheses, Matthew takes his stand with those who had resisted the catastrophic attempt at a "military solution," which he and his church had lived through.

None of this is a matter of strategy. To turn the other cheek is not to shame the opponent or win him or her over, to cause the enemy to repent. Going the extra mile is not a matter of prudence calculated to keep a low profile when you do not have power and need to "get along." These sayings express the inherent rule of the kingdom of God, are God's ultimate way of dealing with humanity exhibited in the life and death of Jesus, who went to the cross. All such hermeneutical considerations are not a matter of watering them down, finding a meaning that does seem reasonable and with which we can live. They are not to be made "reasonable," for they violate the "common sense" of this world and point to another reality. They ask us whether we are oriented to the God who has redefined power and kingship in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

That last sentence is precisely how I have come to understand the Sermon on the Mount and the imperatives of Jesus – are we "oriented to the God who has redefined power and kingship in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth?"

Let me reinforce this view as Jesus' own self-understanding as Luke presents the story of Jesus. Luke, in the most familiar and best-loved presentation of Jesus' birth has angels singing,

Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace, goodwill among people.

In the fourth chapter Jesus endures the wilderness temptation which is, in itself, a subject worth study as it seems Luke's intention to say that Jesus had to choose wisely and be resolute in the means and manner of the execution of his ministry. Returning, Luke tells us, from that bout with temptation, he, filled with God's Spirit, comes to his hometown, Nazareth, where he is invited to read the scripture in his family synagogue. He reads from the prophet Isaiah (chpt. 42:1f). Luke 4:16f reads,

“When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:
‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,’
And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.
The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.””

If you go to the passage Jesus read on that occasion you will find Jesus breaks off with the words “the year of the Lord's favor” and stops mid-sentence for the text of Isaiah 61:2 goes on:

“and the day of vengeance of our God.”

As I said above, this is Luke's picture of Jesus, Jesus' self-understanding as Luke understood it. Luke's ending with “the year of the Lord's favor”, rather than continuing with “and the day of the vengeance of our God” cannot have been an accident. That brief description of Jesus' ministry was one of grace and healing, fully in accord with the passage from Matthew – the call to emulate God in love even of the enemy.

Again it is Luke who has Jesus speak from the cross the word of forgiveness full of grace,

“Father, forgive them for they do
not know what they are doing”,
even as he was being crucified. A moment that never fails to fill me with awe.

Move now to the end of Luke's story – post-Easter. After forty days he tells us in his second volume, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Jesus leads the disciples out to Bethany where he blesses them and is “carried up into heaven.” And that is where

the *Acts of the Apostles* takes up the story. In chapter 1 he counsels them to remain in Jerusalem where not many days hence, they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. But in the Acts account the disciples ask an all-important question:

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?”

That, of course, was Luke’s question in the 70’s and 80’s C.E. There is a scholarly debate about whether the apocalyptic passages of the gospel reflect Jesus’ own understanding. I tend to side with, for example, Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan who do not believe Jesus was awaiting the apocalyptic coming of God’s Kingdom in which the wicked would be damned and the righteous vindicated as the rule of God comes to earth in God’s dramatic action. And I think Luke told the story of Jesus in which Jesus understood the Kingdom as present already in his ministry. Reading the Isaiah passage he claims, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And, again in his telling of the story he has Jesus respond to the question raised by the disciples, but here raised by the Pharisees:

“Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, the Kingdom of God is not coming with things than can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is.’ For, in fact, the Kingdom of God is among you.”
(Luke 17: 20-21)

Another possible reading is “The Kingdom is *within* you.”

But to return to the disciples’ question, Jesus responds,

“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

With that, Jesus is lifted up in a cloud taking him out of their sight. And Chapter 2 opens:

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability.”

Such is Luke’s story of Jesus, beginning with his birth, his crucifixion at the time of the Jewish Feast of Passover, resurrection after three days, a forty-day earthly sojourn post-Easter during which there are various appearances and then, ten days later on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the Baptism with the Holy Spirit.

As for the question of the Kingdom's arrival, Jesus says it is not yours to know but Luke answers the question such that there is to be a period of apostolic witness and his *Acts of the Apostles* is centered mostly in the missionary work of Paul whose story he tells, the story ending with Paul under house arrest in Rome continuing to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom that arrived with Jesus.

Through principally Paul's ministry the Gospel was preached throughout the Roman Empire and churches were founded in the metropolitan centers of the empire. The Jesus movement that began as a Jewish movement found a ready hearing in the Gentile world. That whole history and the Jewish-Gentile tension is another story. But the spread of that early Jesus movement was quite amazing so that three hundred years later the Christian religion had moved from being a persecuted cult to being the lone established religion of the Roman Empire.

That too is a story I cannot go into only to say that the Constantinian establishment carried with it great peril for the Christian movement. Imperial recognition carried with it the danger of imperial control.

In his first volume of a trilogy *Christian Theology in a North American Context*, Douglas John Hall writes,

One consequence of the establishment for Christian thought has already been alluded to: the emphasis on oneness or unity (the ecumenical or catholic dimension) could never be regarded in purely theological terms after the adoption of the faith by imperial Rome. For now it was bound up with quite specific political aspirations and concepts. When we confess belief in "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" in the Nicene Creed, it is well to remember that fact. On precisely such grounds, Theodosius outlawed all forms of Christianity but the 'Catholic' (i.e., the imperially recognized majority) form, at the same time (394 C.E.) as he outlawed the non-Christian religions. Unity, under the conditions of Constantinianism, is defined by secular authority and/or standards of assessment, and it is therefore likely to mean something closer to *uniformity* than to the oneness for which Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 17).

A still more provocative consequence of the establishment for the theology of the church is implied with the mention of Nicaea. *Both* the councils of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451) took place under the conditions of Christian establishment. Concretely this means: the church's doctrinal decisions about (a) the nature of the Godhead (that God is triune) and (b) the person of Jesus (that he is God and man in one historical person) were taken by a church which now conceived itself in the role of official cult to the empire. Indeed, Nicaea was convened by Constantine personally, with the express purpose of putting a stop to Christian differences which could only further divide an already disunited empire. The decisions arrived at in these two pivotal councils were to determine orthodoxy in

Theology and Christology up to and including our own time. This is a staggering observation, and from our present perspective we must ask: How would it have influenced the Christian church's conception of God, and even more explicitly its Christology, if decisions in these key areas of belief had evolved under the conditions of diaspora and persecution rather than those of establishment?

In his *The Historical Jesus*, John Dominic Crossan cites the early Christian historian, Eusebius (*Vita Constantine*, 3.15):

It is hard, indeed, not to get very, very nervous in reading this description of the imperial banquet celebrating the Council of Nicaea's conclusion: Detachments of the body-guard and troops surrounded the entrance of the palace with drawn swords, and through the midst of them the men of God proceeded without fear into the innermost of the Imperial apartments, in which some were the Emperor's companions at table, while others reclined on couches arranged on either side. One might have thought that a picture of Christ's kingdom was thus shadowed forth, and a dream rather than reality. (Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 3.15; Brown 1982:16)

The meal and the Kingdom still come together, but now the participants are the male bishops, and they recline, with the Emperor himself, to be served by others. Maybe, Christianity is an inevitable and absolutely necessary 'betrayal' of Jesus, else it might all have died among the hills of Lower Galilee. But did that "betrayal" have to happen so swiftly, succeed so fully, and be enjoyed so thoroughly? Might not a more even dialectic have been maintained between Jesus and Christ in Jesus Christ?

Hall sees this danger worked out in the Protestant Church:

Protestantism has preferred to limp through most of its history following two paths, ultimately divergent; the path of political quietism or noninterference, and that of personal piety. The cross could sometimes be a meaningful symbol for the latter, but not for the former. Protestantism as the favored religion of Northern European states and their missionary offshoots has been obliged and content to hide even from itself the critical political and social implications of its theology of the cross. (*Confessing the Faith*, p. 209)

Let me suggest that in the establishment of the Christian religion as the official faith of Imperial Rome may be the loss of the Way of Jesus and the ascending of the High Christology that was defined in the Nicene Creed of 325 C.E. and the Chalcedonian Formula of 451 C.E. With those creedal definitions of Jesus as God as well as human, the drama of the cross became a place of atonement where God and the human were reconciled –with all the images that were utilized to describe that drama of salvation. It appears to me that the two paths referred to above by

Hall emerged very early in the era of establishment – political quietism and personal piety.

Only with a posture of political quietism can the Empire tolerate the religious cult of whatever sort. And now, rather than the Jesus movement continuing in the path of its founder, it became a cult of salvation – Jesus as my personal savior. I can be assured of my personal salvation while I live in an imperial state that may be ruthless in its world domination and militarism.

With some exceptions, I think that has been the pattern of the Christian Church; co-opted by empire, blessing the status quo, failing to speak truth to power. The Pope may make public statements and take positions on critical issues concerning the international situation but the respective national governments pay little heed. So also with the World Council of Churches or the National Council of Churches.

In the meantime the Church continues to offer the gift of salvation in Jesus' name and do much good in the world among the struggling masses of humankind.

The more I become attuned to the Way of Jesus, the more I realize how little I have followed him. The more I realize how irrelevant the church is in a world that is so fraught with danger, the danger of seeing the human experience come to an end in nuclear holocaust, a world in which my own nation has become in our day what Rome was in the day of Jesus. Ironically, Roman Imperial power killed Jesus as a dangerous subversive, one who practiced non-violent resistance to the established order than dominated the world by military might – and then co-opted his movement, transforming it into an agency of Empire, a harmless cult of personal salvation.

With these growing realizations, you can understand why I feel the tension of being both a follower of Jesus and a citizen of this nation.

Tomorrow we will observe Memorial Day and remember those who died on behalf of their country. Somehow it feels so different to me than the days of what Tom Brokaw called The Greatest Generation. To be drafted by one's nation for service when one's nation is under threat is honorable. To remember with gratitude the sacrifice of those whose lives were offered up to defend the freedom and security of the nation is right and proper. But it feels different to me when, because of my nation's imperial designs, a volunteer military is established, not primarily to defend our nation but to be the means of world domination.

I suspect few of us are aware of the massive military network spread around the globe with bases on every continent but Antarctica! A massive military-industrial complex warned about by President Eisenhower has become a reality. We, as a nation, are in the grip of imperial domination at a time in the world when the

global reality has arrived. Such a reality's imperative is nuclear disarmament, the end of war and the building of world government.

Now and then, here and there, voices have been raised for peace and human community. For example, during the First World War, one of the nation's greatest preachers offered a prayer to which a response set forth clearly the choice we face:

“O, God, bless Germany! At war with her people, we hate them not at all... We acknowledge before Thee our part in the world's iniquity....we dare not stand in Thy sight and accuse Germany as though she alone were guilty of our international disgrace. We all are guilty.”

The brief clip goes on, “Charles Biddle, an American pilot, responded to Fosdick's prayer by pledging to kill as many ‘Huns’ as he could, saying that, ‘if Christianity requires us to forgive them I am afraid I am no Christian.’” (Church History-March, cited in the *Christian Century*, May 5, 2009).

The American pilot, Biddle, “got it” – The Way of Jesus or the way of war – on the way to human catastrophe. Which will we choose? For me there is only one choice: The Way of Peace as embodied in the Way of Jesus.

References:

Douglas John Hall. *Confessing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context, Vol. I*. Fortress Press, 1991.