

COMMITTED TO ANOTHER WAY

Luke 9: 51-61; I John 4: 7-11

The Corrymeela Community Rededication Service
Cairnshill Methodist, 7 January 2024

[I am starting with a history lesson, which means I am also starting with an apology. The only thing more long-winded than a preacher is a historian. I am both. Get settled in.]

There is a theory that North America was harder to colonise because North Americans did not act the way Europeans did. In the century after Columbus's arrival, Spain conquered the Caribbean and Mesoamerica and parts of South America relatively easily. In the Antilles and the area south of the Rio Grande there were hierarchical empires present. There was a Mayan Empire. There was an Aztec Empire. There were elite ruling classes already in place. And that made them easy targets. Identify who was in charge, overcome the relative few at the top, and you could replace one empire with your own.

North America was different. North America had also had empires and hierarchical power structures. There had been empires in places like the Mississippi valley centuries earlier. Dynastic lines of tyrannical leaders. Enslaved labour. Religious orders reinforcing cultural myths; There had been elites making up a ruling class holding most of the power. But then something happened. Climate change happened. The Little Ice Age, which began in the 14th century, exposed the weakness of hoarding power. It showed the limitations of strong men who promised security but couldn't deliver. The Little Ice Age affected North America more acutely than other places and led the people there to trust less and less in the promises of self-appointed elites and holy men to save them. The ordering of society shifted away from top-down, top-heavy empires to relationships of kin, to small communities where people knew each other and trusted each other, where alliances were forged through shared experiences and mutual trust, where decisions were made through consensus. If there were individuals in charge, they were often older women.

The absence of a hierarchical/patriarchal system stymied the Spanish, the French, the English who assumed they could negotiate with or overthrow an imperial head, an elite class, and have the rest of the people fall in line. But there was no *one* to negotiate with in North America. There was no *one* to overthrow. Power was not held centrally. It was shared collectively. Power did not flow from one source but came through relationships from somewhere beyond. And that made the native people almost impossible to defeat. Despite their guns and despite their smallpox, the Europeans were more often than not the ones at a disadvantage in North America.

The lesson is that a bigger empire will always beat a smaller one. And so as an empire you will always be looking over your shoulder to see if something bigger is coming along. You project power. You experience fear. But there is another way. As this history would suggest, empires are no match for the power of community.

He Rebuked Them; He Rebuked Us

I bring this up because not only to prove that over the Christmas break I actually read a whole book (!) - and now, of course, think everyone else should read it, too.* I bring this up because it helps remind me that one of the main points of Corrymeela is that as a community we are supposed to stand in contrast to the ridiculous ideas of power this world would have us believe. If anything is going to save us in this life, it won't be a bigger

empire or a bigger gun or violence used in the right way. If anything is going to save us in this life, it won't be a utopian structure that imposes order from on high. It will be love. Messy, chaotic, unpredictable love. It will be community that we experience and know is there: people committed to us not only when things are easy, but particularly when things are hard. It will be us committing ourselves to another way of being. Putting our hand to this plough and never looking back.

If you heard Munther Isaac's Christmas Sermon from Bethlehem, you will have heard his anger at the hypocrisy of the Western Church in response to what is going on in Gaza - the grotesque absurdity of Christian nationalism - the twisting of theology to justify empire. Fittingly, Munther quotes this passage from *Luke* we read today. When Jesus and the disciples set their face to Jerusalem, they are not received in one of the Samaritan villages. And the disciples are offended on Jesus' behalf. They remind me of the people David Ervine said would happily travel 100 miles out of their way to receive an insult. James and John ask Jesus if, to teach the Samaritans a lesson, they should 'command fire to come down from heaven to consume them.' James and John are speaking the language of empire. They are looking to gain power and to use power to threaten and punish and control. They have an instinct to demonstrate who's in charge perhaps because they fear they might not be. Jesus rebukes them. 'Uh, no.' he says, 'We won't be doing that.'

Munther Isaac rebuked the Western Churches this Christmas, not for wanting to do something, but for failing to do anything. He rebuked us for our silence as he pointed to the 'Christ in the Rubble.' He said in his sermon that he felt sorry for us. Preaching from a war zone, he pitied us for having forgotten that the Christ Child is in the rubble, that Emmanuel is with people most at risk - not in palaces of power at a safe distance. He pitied us for having reached a point where our ideas of religion and empire are so tightly wound, we have trouble separating them out or speaking against abuses of power. We have accepted the norm of empire to make sense of the world. Within the church, even within organisations like Corrymeela, we cannot imagine what success looks like except through imperial measures of more and more, bigger and bigger, what is in it for me? What am I getting out of this? How does this get me ahead? Does this increase my security? A church like that, a culture like that, a structure like that is doomed. Sooner or later, a bigger empire will arrive on our shore and take over.

Empires want to grow in power. They actually grow in fear. And also in their ability to tolerate cruelty. In an empire, you start to look over your shoulder and look for reasons to command fire to come down from heaven.

But there is another way.

Something Different

Corrymeela began because people were concerned about the state of the church in a Protestant state. They saw a church too tightly wound with the power structure of the day, too comfortable with systems that claimed moral authority but practiced injustice. They wanted to experience real community: a gathering of people committed to each other not only because of what they shared in common but also because of how they were different. They would commit to Jesus's teaching of love, grace and forgiveness. They would learn to listen first rather than proclaim. They would commit to being changed rather than to imposing solutions. They would set themselves on a journey moving closer

to a world where we work for the wellbeing of others rather than for the protection of ourselves.

We keep doing this, we keep committing to beginning that journey every year because we still aren't any better at it, 60 years later. Every year we recommit to this different way of being. Every year we fail to get it right. At some point we might just give up. But a funny thing happens when we turn away from the easier path, the cosy accommodation with the dominant culture. Something funny happens when we choose generosity and welcome over tightness and security. We find joy. And laughter. And surprise. And frustration. And a lot of annoying people. And a lot to annoy us within ourselves. And new problems. But we also find a glimpse of something the world doesn't know how to produce: Hope.

When I asked Seán Harvey if he could produce a cover piece for this year's prayer guide, he asked if there was any particular theme I wanted him to keep in mind. 'Well,' I said, 'With the NI Legacy and Reconciliation Act, our theme of this year should be Reclaiming Reconciliation. We need to talk about relinquishing power and avoiding hierarches of worth. Something to help us stress the fundamental truth about our interdependence with one another.'

Sean came back with a school of fish. He explained: 'It's a playful piece. I think we could all use a little fun and imagination this year.' He's so right. We could all use a little fun and imagination. This is a big commitment. It shouldn't be taken lightly. But the wonderful surprise is that when we do commit ourselves to a community of love rather than to a system of power, we discover we don't have to live in fear of losing. We discover we don't have to get everything right to be a part of something better. We discover that being in a community of belonging allows us to experience life more fully: a life of courage and learning and love. When we put our hand to *that* plough, we don't want to look back. It's too much fun going forward.

According to this one book I read, when the North Americans were finally defeated it wasn't because the Europeans had proven themselves more powerful. The North Americans lost, they became vulnerable to the threat of empire and the devastation of colonialism when they started acting like colonial empires themselves. When they began to use their advantage over the Europeans to secure more power. It went wrong when they started believing wealth and power needed to be concentrated to keep themselves safe. They recreated structures of control with heads that could be replaced. Their fear of losing power led them to their fall.

You and I forgo a great strength when we accept the lie that power is greatest when held by a few rather than when shared between a great number. We forget a wonderful truth that we find power not from an individual source but through our relationships, stemming from somewhere beyond any of us. You and I abandon an endlessly joyful path when we look over our shoulder in fear.

Let's not look over our shoulder in fear. Let's commit to the journey ahead. There is fun and imagination in what lies before us.

In the name of the Creator and the Christ and the Holy Spirit: One God. Amen.

* Pekka Hämmäläinen, *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing, 2022).