CHRISTIAN COMPROMISE

Trinity 6
Texts: Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43; Romans 8.12-25

This time last week I was sitting in a café in Weimar in south-eastern Germany. Weimar is famous for being the home of two of the heroes of Germany’s 18th century Enlightenment, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich von Schiller. It’s also famous for being the seat of the Weimar Republic, Germany’s ill-fated experiment with liberal democracy between the end of the First World War and the Nazis’ seizure of power in 1933. While sitting in my café, reading Peter Gay’s classic cultural history of the short-lived Republic, I came across this passage:

Goethe’s politics was apathy, Schiller’s tyrannicide; neither was a mode calculated to prepare men for parliamentary compromises; both, in calling for something higher than politics, helped to pave the way for something lower—barbarism.

“Neither was a mode calculated to prepare men for parliamentary compromises; both, in calling for something higher than politics, helped to pave the way for something lower”. When I read those words I was immediately reminded of the morally self-righteous political idealism of the Scottish Nationalists, which, in my opinion, would have brought disaster upon both Scotland the United Kingdom, had it prevailed in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. Political ideals are fine things, but not when they’re used to puff up one’s own side and denigrate the opposition, nor when they’re pursued with ruthless or reckless impatience, for then they legitimate the doing of great injustice and injury: in calling for something higher, they pave the way for something lower. Sometimes compromise, for all its frustrating imperfection, is wiser and more humane.

According to this morning’s parable, Jesus appears to have been of the same mind as Peter Gay:

The kingdom of heaven [he tells us] is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied. The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest’.

The Gospel then explains: “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age”. We don’t know what specific situation originally provoked the parable. We don’t know exactly what kind of ‘pulling up’ was under consideration. Nonetheless, it is clear that Jesus counselled compromise: let the weeds grow among the wheat, lest in uprooting the bad you tear out the good as well. Tolerate frustration and imperfection for the sake of the good.
Note, however, that Jesus did not counsel mere compromise. He counselled *provisional* compromise—compromise until ‘the end of the age’, when God, who is capable of much finer discrimination than us humans, will do the final weeding:

As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

The compromise that Jesus recommends, therefore, is not settled and complacent. It yearns for the final discrimination, the Final Judgement, when everything that causes sin and evil will be eradicated from the world. Daily it prays, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven”.

Our reading from St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans underscores this unsettled, yearning, hopeful dimension to all of Christian life, including its compromises:

We know [writes Paul] that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Christian compromise is patient, but it isn’t complacent. Its eyes raised up by hope, it remains dissatisfied by its own imperfection and it yearns to overcome itself.

Let me give this abstract point some historical flesh and blood. Take the Peace of Vereeniging, of which I am confident none of you will ever have heard. This was the final settlement of the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, which was fought in South Africa between the British and the two Afrikaner or Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The war had a number of causes, but among them was deep resentment on the part of the Boers at British criticism of their mistreatment of black Africans and correlative interference by British imperial authorities to secure African rights. Cape Colony had granted black Africans the vote, under certain conditions, as early as 1853 (seventeen years before the U.S.A.). And in the 1881 Convention of Pretoria, which ended the First Anglo-Boer War, the British had insisted on the suzerainty of the Empire, partly to secure the right of imperial authorities to intervene in defence of black Africans.

However, at the Peace of Vereeniging in 1902, which ended the second war, the British agreed to let the question of African rights be decided by the Boer republics, *after* they had been removed from post-war imperial supervision and granted confederal independence. That is, it was agreed that the republics should decide the matter for themselves. Some judge this to have been a lamentably bad compromise, because it involved the simple surrender of a humanitarian cause and demonstrated that the British had never really cared about African rights in the first place. It exposed their humanitarian claims as mere rhetoric. Such is the view of the Anglo-Irish historian Thomas Pakenham, whose fine book on the Boer War would be even better, were it not for the unmistakeable sound of an anti-British axe grinding.
I agree with Pakenham that the treaty would have been a bad compromise—and unChristian compromise—if it really had expressed a simple, casual, or careless abandonment of the good of justice for Africans. However, there is a plausible, alternative reading. The Second Boer War had taken the British far longer, and cost them far more, to win than they had expected. In its latter stages it had moved into a guerrilla phase and was accordingly very bitter indeed. The Boer republics attracted a lot of international sympathy, and the British a correlative amount of opprobrium. At its end, the British were extremely keen to make a sustainable peace and to bind up the deep wounds inflicted upon the relationship between Afrikaner and Briton. They perceived that to insist on African rights would be to pour salt in those wounds, and could result in the resumption of war. They also perceived that for the imperial authorities to try and enforce such rights in the republics would require a level of military and financial commitment that could not sustain domestic political support. So they compromised. But they did not compromise for trivial reasons: they wanted to avoid the resumption of bitter war and the futile imposition of military occupation. Nor did they simply surrender the cause of African well-being. Rather, they compromised in the hope that, long-term, once the Boer republics had settled down in the British Empire and discovered the benefits of its administration, and once immigration had increased the British proportion of their populations, the issue of the rights of black Africans could be successfully addressed by political means.

The Treaty of Vereeniging, therefore, was not a complacent compromise. It was made in the recognition that, under the circumstances, to attempt something higher could well result in something lower—that to force the issue of African rights would probably rekindle war, deepen Boer resentment, and fail in its aim. But the treaty was also made in the active hope of creating the political conditions for ultimate success, further down the line. It was therefore both patient and hopeful, a restless settlement. As such, it was, I think, a Christian compromise.

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