



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

29 December 2019: Said Matins with Hymns

The First Sunday of Christmas

Isaiah 35:1–6, Galatians 3:23–end

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Two weeks ago I was in Hong Kong. I was there to take part in a conference on Reinhold Niebuhr. In case you haven't heard of him, Niebuhr was an American theologian, who came to prominence in the 1930s, stayed there through the '50s and '60s, and died in 1971. What was most unusual about him was that he attained prominence, not only in church circles, but also in public ones. Martin Luther King claimed his influence, and President Barack Obama named him as his "favourite theologian". Obama's 2009 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech was described by one newspaper columnist as a "faithful reflection" of Niebuhr.

The reason for Niebuhr's public influence lay in the realistic character of his Christian thought. Indeed, Niebuhr was the pioneer of what is now known as 'Christian Realism'. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, liberal Protestantism in America was inclined to think of Jesus primarily as the preacher of the brotherhood of man, the Spirit of God as the spirit of the socialist movement, and the Kingdom of God as socialism realised on earth. It assumed that the Christian ideals of equality, community, and especially love could be made to find straightforward social and political expression. Brought up in this tradition of the 'Social Gospel', Niebuhr thought so, too.

At least, he thought so until he became a pastor in Detroit during the First World War. There he witnessed at first hand the miserable drudgery of workers in Henry Ford's car factories, and the bitter industrial struggle between management and the trade unions. This experience led him to think that, whereas self-sacrificing, Christian love can operate directly in interpersonal relations between family members, friends, and neighbours, it can't operate directly in political relations between social groups. At the political level, the embers of human sympathy grow cold, and self-interest dominates. Hence the title of probably his most famous book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, which was first published in the United States in 1932, then in Britain in 1935, and to my surprise, not long after in China.

So Niebuhr's thought became realistic in the sense that it recognised the persistence of sinful selfishness, especially at the collective level of social groups; that political conflict is not resolved by love, but by justice; and that justice involves a pragmatic compromise between competing interests. It was this soberly unidealistic point of view that lies behind the famous, so-called 'Serenity Prayer' that is attributed to Niebuhr:

Father, give us courage to change what must be altered,
serenity to accept what cannot be helped,
and the insight to know the one from the other.

Or in its more familiar form:

God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change,
Courage to change the things we can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

Notwithstanding all that, Niebuhr's sober realism didn't degenerate into stoic apathy or cynical pragmatism. It did remain Christian. While it's true that he thought that justice in the form of compromise between competing interests was the best that could be hoped for in political life, he still thought that justice should aim at the Christian ideal of self-sacrificial love. In that way, justice would be raised above sheer selfishness and vindictiveness. His view is captured in his paradoxical description of Christian love as "the impossible possibility": impossible to realise fully and straightforwardly; but possible to realise fragmentarily and indirectly.

I am something of a disciple of Niebuhr's, for I have always been drawn to a Christian ethic that is politically plausible. Niebuhr's early idealism was chastened through his experience of industrial strife; mine was chastened in a conference I ran just over twenty years ago here in Oxford. The topic of the conference was "Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict", and we had speakers talking about Northern Ireland, South Africa, Guatemala and East Germany. At the beginning of the proceedings, I, and others talked unselfconsciously about forgiveness and reconciliation. But then a young woman, Ulrike Poppe, a Lutheran dissident who had been twice imprisoned by the communist authorities in East Germany, stood up. "What on earth are you talking about?", she said. "What's all this talk about forgiveness and reconciliation? I now live on the same street as the man who informed on me. I didn't know him then and I certainly don't want to know him now. What do you mean by 'reconciliation'?" As I reflected on Ulrike Poppe's intervention, it dawned on me that the

paradigm of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation—at least in Christian cultures—is interpersonal. It's the paradigm depicted by Rembrandt in his famous painting of *The Prodigal Son*, where the wayward son, on his knees, is enfolded in his father's embrace. However, when we speak of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation on a collective or political level, we do not speak of the paradigmatic things; we speak of weaker, attenuated analogues. In Ulrike Poppe's case the full embrace of 'reconciliation' simply wasn't appropriate; more suitable was something more sober, more modest such as 'accommodation'.

This point was reinforced at another conference on the same topic ten years later, when a Danish colleague showed us a picture. It was taken in Rwanda, in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. The context was a local, village 'Truth and Reconciliation' procedure that sought to elicit confessions from the perpetrators of genocide, in order to effect a kind of rehabilitation into the community. The picture featured two men. One was the relative of a murdered victim; the other, the murderer. The good news was that they were standing right next to each other; the not-so-good news, that one was looking up at the sky, while the other was looking down at his feet. Their eyes could not meet. There was no love, nor anything as full and sentimental as 'reconciliation'. But there was co-existence, which, under the circumstances, was no mean achievement.

Like Niebuhr, then, I count myself a Christian Realist. So what do I make of passages such as the one that made up our first reading this morning? There we heard of the prophet Isaiah's vision of the Kingdom of God:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God....
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. (35.1-6)

We find the same kind of vision in the Revelation to John, at the very end of the Bible. In Chapter 21, we read:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and

God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away.” And the One seated on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new”. (21.3-5)

These apocalyptic visions hold forth a picture of radical, revolutionary transformation: “Behold ... all things new”. How should realists read them? As merely idealistic fantasies? Well, a Christian realist cannot be quite so cynical. And Niebuhr wasn't. For him such visions are ‘impossible possibilities’: impossible to realise fully and straightforwardly; but possible to realise fragmentarily and indirectly—and important to aspire to, to approximate.

I agree, but I'd go further. I'd say that such radical, revolutionary transformation is fully and directly possible—but for God, not for us. In this Christmas season, we remember the saving miracle of the Incarnation of God in Jesus, and in Eastertide we will remember the saving miracle of Jesus' Resurrection from the dead. These saving miracles give us reason to believe in the divine possibility of revolutionary transformation. And that belief is important, because an ideal we know is merely a useful fiction is an ideal that lacks commanding, motivating authority. It's an ideal we despair of.

We Christians live between tokens of transformation and their fulfilment. We live with our backs to the Incarnation and Resurrection and our faces toward the End (or the Fulfilment) of History. Because of the former, we hope for the latter. Standing between the ground of hope on the one hand, and its realisation on the other, our calling is to aspire to the vision of the Kingdom of God, knowing that our achievement will be fragmentary, but trusting God to take our little fragments and use them, in His good time, to complete the whole.