

Hidden Treasure

June 16, 2024

Rev. David Jones

Mark 4: 26-34

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, (11-13), 14-17

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Psalms 20

A number of years ago, the French sociologist, philosopher, and lay theologian, Jacques Ellul, published a book entitled “Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes” (1973) in which he examines how its use shapes our perception of the world around us, and what constitutes value and importance, in a society dominated by technology. It was startlingly perceptive at the time and suggested that in the absence of a countervailing force, we each may well lose our ability to think independently, incapable of resisting the designs of those bent on using us for their purposes, however apparently benign. Arising from his concern over the unmitigated impact of technology upon social relationships in general, he in effect issued a warning that we all were at risk of effectively losing our souls, for the sake of pursuing a lifestyle that offers unrestrained consumption and indulgence, regardless of potential moral or ethical consequences. Although not a national bestseller, the book nonetheless triggered considerable discussion within the academic community, particularly in a Christian context, for many years afterwards, as its thesis had implications not only for politics but for religion as well. And for a fourth-year university student such as myself at the time, it was pretty heady stuff, as I had begun a study of televangelists, and could see where its application might lead to a deeper understanding of why their influence had become so paramount, for those who accepted their message without question, which to my mind amounted to a subtle distortion of the Gospel; one that played to the basest desires of the human heart, and fostered dissatisfaction with their current spiritual and material circumstances, prompting them to advocate for a return to an era when traditional norms were understood to be dominant.

Propaganda as a phenomenon, of course, has long been part of the human experience. Stretching as far back as the ancient Egyptians, it was employed by pharaohs, kings, and emperors alike to bolster their reign, emphasizing the ability they possessed to rule not only their subjects, but any people conquered in their name. Throughout the lands under their reign could be found statues, monuments or inscriptions attesting to their power and might, usually demonstrated by various military exploits, which emphasized their prowess in battle and hence the right to rule those under them. The construction of ornate palaces and other structures served the same purpose, declaring the wealth and power of the ruler, reinforcing the perception of his right to reign. The Roman Colosseum, completed in 80 CE under the Emperor Titus, conqueror of Jerusalem, exemplifies the use of such buildings for political ends. Until falling into disuse in the fifth century, it was host to various gladiatorial contests, often including the use of wild animals, the purpose of which was to demonstrate the innate superiority of Roman rule, not only over the human world, but the natural as well. The use of coinage was also put to the same end, indicating through its depiction not only the ruler’s identity, but his right to obedience from those over whom he held sway. Utilized on a regular basis, it was a constant reminder of who held the reins of power. Although not intended for the same purpose, the gods of a nation often served to reinforce the reign of rulers as well, supplying a religious overlay which sanctioned their reign, provided it was perceived it had their blessing. Priests would accompany a conquering host, and frequently determined through their reading of various signs whether the gods approved of actions about to be taken or not. In the absence of these, a ruler risked loss of support not only from the religious authorities, but also of a population fearful of divine displeasure.

Into this mix, often volatile at times, the seeds of the Gospel were sown. It’s remarkable that any took root at all, given the environment in which they were planted, and its message that ran counter to the cultural

norms of the time, norms that glorified the use of physical force to accomplish frequently violent ends. The intertwining of politics and religion mutually reinforced each other, creating the appearance of an apparent invincible dominion over which the Roman Emperor reigned supreme, both as *pater familias* (father of families) and *pontifex maximus* (chief high priest). Together they constituted a seamless garment of divine and human right to rule which lasted until the end of the western part of the Empire late in the fifth century. The *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace which existed throughout much of this time, succeeded only through the suppression of any opposition via the use of extreme cruelty, of which crucifixion is perhaps the most familiar, reserved for any individual considered a threat to the social order. Often when entering a city within the Empire, the traveler would sometimes be met by rows of those so convicted, a reminder of the fate for any who dared to defy Roman might and right to rule. Perhaps the most successful of all propaganda because of the fear it instilled, crucifixion symbolized not only Roman power, but its ability to impose such wherever and whenever it wished without restraint. As a result, few chose to oppose it, the Jewish people being one notable exception, who revolted against Roman rule not once but twice, leading to their eventual expulsion from the region of Palestine. And yet the proclamation of the Gospel attracted many within the Empire, in spite of its standing in stark contrast to the ethos of the age, as the seeds in large part took root wherever they were sown, leading inhabitants to embrace its message of love of God and love of neighbour, in the process rejecting much that was familiar, in favour of that which offered hope for a better life.

For those who accepted the message of the Gospel, this included becoming part of a community that overlooked social status, and instead focused on the gifts which each brought with him or her, for the same propaganda that served to cement the rule of a Roman emperor, also affirmed the division of society into those meant to be served, and those decreed to meet their needs. Chief amongst these were women and slaves, who by law possessed little in the way of status, and as a result were designated to the lower echelons of the “pecking order”. The upper level of the Colosseum, for example, was reserved for women and slaves, who thus were exposed to the elements when watching gladiatorial combat; the second and third levels, reserved first for the noble class and then for merchants and artisans, were sheltered. The message of the Gospel, however, spoke of a different order, one in which “there was neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, for all are one in (the) Christ Jesus”, an order in which “the last will be first, and the first last” when the world came to an end. A powerful antidote for those who appreciated the injustice of the system in which they lived, it served to attract many looking for an improved lot in life, one in which their status no longer had bearing on their worth. As a significant proportion of the Roman population were slaves, the opportunity to enter a community where status was a non-issue was highly attractive, especially for any who had been freed, but retained the marks and characteristics of their former life. For women the message was no less attractive, as it enabled them to be viewed as of equal importance within the community, no longer subject to the whims of a male-dominated society in which their place was understood to be within the private rather than public sphere, effectively preventing them from becoming a person in their own right, able to conduct themselves in a manner befitting their abilities.

As the seeds of the Gospel continued to take root, it’s estimated that by the start of the fourth century, in spite of intermittent persecutions during which many were put to death, that approximately ten percent of the Empire’s population was Christian; a remarkable six million people. Although considered miraculous by scholars until recently when sociologist Rodney Stark demonstrated how such growth was possible using the example of the Mormon Church, the various reasons given for this increase centre on the willingness of those who had accepted the Gospel to adopt a lifestyle and orientation that ran counter to cultural expectation; during times of plague, for example, rather than fleeing to the countryside, Christians would remain behind to care for those so afflicted, often regardless of their religious affiliation or ability to pay, some losing their own life in the process. Such growth continued throughout the following century to the point where some thirty

million or so were Christian, an astounding fifty percent of the population. By then, of course, Christianity had become the official religion of the Empire, perhaps influencing the increase in numbers, especially among those wanting to position themselves in a manner beneficial to their interests, as the Empire assumed control over administration and salaries of priest and bishop alike. Although the change from persecuted minority to dominant majority is usually perceived to have been detrimental to the spiritual health of what became the institutional Church, in the absence of such growth this would never have occurred, and the course of human history over subsequent centuries been much different. As inheritors of this process, we perhaps have much for which to be thankful, while at the same time much for which we may feel regret; mistreatment of our Indigenous population being yet one example among many, showing how the Church has sometimes “got it wrong”, when in service to the State.

As for propaganda? Its use as a technique of manipulation continues, its effect magnified by recent advances in technology, which permit the targeting of individuals as well as groups. For those well-versed in its creation and application, it has become a powerful tool when focused on a people feeling dispossessed of their place, status or standing in a world increasingly fragmented along fault lines of the leader whose manner and appearance offer the best possibility for acquiring the power needed to implement change. Combined with an increased distrust of information suggestive of a different understanding of the factors leading to this felt loss, and in the absence of a countervailing force that dampens the desire for recompense against those assumed responsible, the door is opened for anyone seeming to possess the ability for those so affected to feel “great” again, through actions designed to restore that which is perceived to have been removed. In a time when biblical illiteracy runs rampant, and many proclaim a counterfeit Gospel that feeds the prejudices and biases of the theologically ignorant, it is up to those who have “ears to hear and eyes to see” to recognize the destructive tendencies born out of such pairing and respond accordingly. The continued existence of an open society, where all may live and worship as they choose, could well depend on it. AMEN.