

## Standing Against Violence

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Violence comes in many forms. It comes as unwanted physical contact - bruising and violating bodies, minds, identity, and self-confidence. It comes as words, in looks, and in silence. It comes disguised in practices and policies of exclusion and stigmatization, and in the passivity of onlookers. It comes as minorities are marginalized, as women are objectified, and as children are coerced. It comes in our traditions, our religion, our family histories, and learned behaviours. It comes disguised as a 'solution', as something that is 'normal'. Like a wind-blown virus it is insidious.

Many here today have experienced this virus and its debilitating effects. I want to honour your resilience. I want us as individuals and as a community to stand alongside you and encourage you. Let us honour each other in all the little ways we have sought to withstand the power of violence. Let us pray for each other, forgive ourselves and others, and heal each other. Above all let us be kind, being gentle with each other's stories and wounds.

It might seem crazy to those outside the Church, but when thinking about violence I think of Jesus. He was born into a violated and violent community. The Romans, shortly before Jesus was born, burnt to the ground and killed all the inhabitants of the neighbouring town to Nazareth.<sup>i</sup> It is possible that Mary, Jesus' mother, was raped by a Roman soldier.<sup>ii</sup> Jesus' mentor, John the baptiser, was beheaded by Rome's puppet 'king', Herod. Jesus himself was cruelly executed by the Romans. A number of his key followers met similar fates. He lived, breathed, and taught in a world of violence.

And yet, come down to us bearing something of the voiceprint of Jesus and mixed with his followers' interpretations, we have stories and sayings of this man who said, "Love your enemies"<sup>iii</sup>. We have this man who, contrary to custom, tradition, and religious practice, reached out and included women – honouring their wisdom and identity. We have this man Jesus who reached out and included children – honouring their belonging and personhood. We have this man Jesus who reached out and included racial minorities (Samaritans, Syro-Phoenicians...) – learning about God from them and with them. And we have this Jesus who even reached out and included Roman soldiers! The breadth of his forgiveness and inclusive loving-kindness is mind-blowing.

Jesus resisted the wind-blown virus of violence. He resisted what he had seen all around him as a child. He resisted the violence he heard in the Holy Scriptures. He resisted the virus of violence even as it took his own life. He stood against the prevailing wind.

When we begin to read our Holy Scriptures we are often struck by the violence. These aren't stories about the Hundred Acre wood where Christopher Robin plays. These are stories where the character God seems to play favourites resulting in brother killing brother (Cain and Abel), where the same character – or is it a different God by this stage? – kills off most of humanity in a flood because they wouldn't do what he said. These are stories where women are objects that serve the wants of men. So Sarai, Abram's wife, is given by her husband to Pharaoh for his sexual pleasure.<sup>iv</sup> Are you surprised she later couldn't conceive with Abram? So Hagar, the foreign slave, is used as a surrogate without Hagar's consent.<sup>v</sup> These are stories where men like Abram, now Abraham, abdicate their patriarchal responsibilities – like settling the dispute between Sarai and Hagar – and in such abdication create even more violence. Hagar's son, Ishmael, branded by the murderous rejection of his father Abraham, is acknowledged as the founder of Islam, and from Abraham's other son, Isaac, emotionally crippled by the attempted filicide, sprouts Judaism and, later, Christianity.

The Bible reeks of violence, just as much of humanity's recorded history does. The dominant narrative is a violent one. And yet, as Leonard Cohen says, 'there is [thankfully!] a crack in everything - that's how the light gets in.'

The cracks in Holy Scripture are from those on the margins. Like the anonymous author of the Jonah parable critiquing racism. Like the story of Queen Vashti standing up against the treatment of women as pornographic objects. Like the prophet Nathan, risking his life, to challenge the violence and misuse of power by King David. Like the prophets Amos, Micah, Hosea, and others who were not reformers of the political-religious system but iconoclasts who stood against it. They spoke out

against the violence of war and the violence of religion. They condemned the exploitation of the poor and powerless.

Jesus was born, lived, and died on the margin. It was only long after his death that his followers moved from the margin to the centre, and there in time they would be seduced by the 'solution', the 'normality' of violence. They would be corrupted by the virus. In their desire for security, to allay their fears, they listened to the wrong people and believed the wrong myths. Not unlike today.

Last week a church burnt down - Hopewell Missionary Baptist Church in Greenville, Mississippi. It is an African American church. The arsonist(s) not only set it alight, they painted a political slogan on the side which read, 'Vote Trump'.

Now Donald Trump, the Republican nominee in the US presidential election, did not set fire to the Church or tell his supporters to set fire to the Church. Indeed I expect his campaign will issue a statement of condolence to the parishioners of Hopewell Church. Moreover, unlike his blatantly racist comments about an American judge of Mexican ancestry, and Mexican Americans in general, he has (as far as I am aware) not directly used his invective against African Americans per se.

So does Donald, and the Trump phenomenon, bear any responsibility for this arson in Greenville?

Let me turn to an example closer to home. Last week an interview with Paul Henry, a well-known and popular TV presenter, was published in the NZ Herald. In that café interview he objectified in a demeaning way the body of a woman who was sitting at a nearby table. Henry's words were clear and unequivocal. Just as radio host Max Key's comments were a week earlier. These men were voicing a milder version of Donald Trump's recording, made public on October 7<sup>th</sup>, when Trump justified not only objectification of women's bodies but sexual assault.

So do Paul Henry, or Max Key, or Donald Trump's words bear any responsibility for the prevalence of sexual assault?

I am not suggesting that speech which diminishes and violates the identity of another human being, no matter how disgusting we find that, is of the same magnitude as physical actions that violate the body of another.

What I am suggesting is that violence, including sexual and racial violence, is like a wind-blown virus that can be ignored, resisted, or encouraged. Conditions can be created for resistance or encouragement of the virus, building immunity to control it or letting it spread.

What I'm further suggesting is that when the public actions and speech of leaders – and of course Paul and Max, who though not politicians like Donald, are opinion leaders and creators... when their actions and speech do not build resistance, then they are not taking the virus seriously, and in the case of these men actually encouraging it.

But most of our political leaders of course aren't like these men. Instead most of our leaders want to say violence is an individual's anger problem; or a family's problem; or a poor family's problem; or a racial minority's problem; or poverty's problem. Most political leaders want to minimize the power of the violence virus and ignore much of what feeds it.

I think if we New Zealanders want to change our nation so that it is a place where children of every race, class, and gender can grow up safely and thrive, then we need to build not only families but communities of resistance. We need to build a nation of resistance - a violence-free Aotearoa New Zealand. As a nation we need to change direction. To do that we need to know what we are up against. We need to recognise the insidious and corrosive power of violence in its many forms – its mediums and message. We need to build alliances. We need to treat it like a major community health crisis – with resources, education, research, and commitment. And we need to believe we can succeed.

Maybe we begin with a simple sticker on the door of the church: "Violence-free Aotearoa NZ". And, like on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg<sup>vi</sup>, some 'theses' to commend it.

Here are 10 for your initial consideration:

1. We take a stand against all forms of violence, and actions, speech, and policies that aid its existence.
2. We uphold the dignity and worth of all people - irrespective of race, gender, class, or sexual orientation.
3. We believe that any act of violence, including violent speech and fantasy, is a transgression against an individual's mana, integrity, and spiritual identity, and a transgression against our communal values of love, freedom, and mutuality.
4. We acknowledge that violence against women and children diminishes us all and detrimentally affects societal wellbeing.
5. We will stand up, speak out, and try to stop any violence - for violence flourishes where there is secrecy or acceptance.
6. We will ensure that all the children in our society are nurtured and protected throughout their lives.
7. We will promote the healing and wellbeing of individuals and families who have been hurt by violence.
8. We will work to eliminate the risk of harm and build protective factors within families and communities to prevent violence.
9. We will seek to reduce what feeds the epidemic of violence in our land – like poverty, unemployment, racism, sexism, and the undervaluing of children.
10. We will support each other to be the best we can be, to prosper, and to flourish.<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Sepphoris.

<sup>ii</sup> Dr Jane Schaberg has written on this subject.

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 5:44.

<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 12:15-19.

<sup>v</sup> Genesis 16.

<sup>vi</sup> This is a reference to Martin Luther and his 95 Theses – and the beginning of the Reformation.

<sup>vii</sup> Some of these 'theses' have been modified from the E Tu Whanau charter <http://etuwhanau.org/>