Thoughts on
Christ amongst the Powers: the Rhetoric of Violence and the Word of the Cross

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This brief paper sketches out two important questions which arise from the conjunction of "the rhetoric of violence" and "the word of the cross".

The first question concerns the *specifically theological* work which can be done in relation to "the rhetoric of violence" characterising much of our social, cultural and political discourse. What can be done here by the church that cannot be done elsewhere? That is, in what way might specifically Christian theological work extend beyond the "politically obvious" critiques which abound? By the "politically obvious" is meant the kind of critique which is predictable, dependent upon who speaks it. This operates on at least two levels. The first is the response to violence which is determined by social mores – whether in acceptance or rejection of the violent word or act. This response is what "everyone" knows. The second is related, in that it involves a predictability of response, but it also involves opposing responses. Thus, within one society, the left can be expected to be critical of an incumbent right-wing government, and so make its predictable critiques of (so also the "more left" critical of a "less" left or centrist government, and so on). When a "controversial" matter arises in the media, the first grab is for those whose response is *already* known – call a Cardinal Pell or a Fred Niles for an opinion on a matter of sexual ethics; call the federal Treasurer for an assessment of a minor party's new economic blueprint. Political discourse (understanding "poli-tical" in its broadest sense) typically *assumes* the obviousness of the positions variously expressed from different quarters: "well they *would* say that, wouldn't they…". While the right-left distinction is a convenient one for our purposes, *predictability,* is the fundamental characteristic of the politically obvious.

Moving beyond the politically obvious – in relation to violence or any other issue – implies a critique of the obvious. But the possibility of overcoming the dynamic of the obvious does not simply spring from the impossibility of reconciliation of the different and opposing views in such "conversations" – it would be equally justifiable to let the power games be played to see who wins. "Mere" analysis of the phenomena cannot provide us with understanding of what is at stake, or what the real problems are. The *theological* impetus to move beyond the politically obvious is the experience of justification had in encounter with the good news about Jesus

Christ. It is only this which will prevent any new approach from simply falling into the straightjacket of us and them, left and right, in and out, east and west – at least formally, if not ultimately materially. The Christian experience of justification is invoked here because it is in this experience that the politically obvious is exposed as *self-righteousness*. This type of self-righteousness brings with it not only the predictability of a statement but also an intransigence of position. To be right before one engages implies that righteousness is a static quality of the individual and not the product of a relationship. Movement, which is implied by relationship, is not necessary; one is right ("just") by virtue of one's stance.

Such a basis for a critique of the politically obvious, then, implies that the doctrine of justification is not simply the doctrine (among the many doctrines) which happens to be useful for the purpose of overcoming the intransigency of the politically obvious. The doctrine of justification describes the beginning point of the specifically Christian experience of the world. This experience has its beginning with the encounter with the crucified and risen Lord. Clearly, crucifixion itself is a violent act. Nevertheless, the failure of Jesus to "come down now from the cross that we may see and believe" (Mk 15.32) is God's insistence that the crucifixion is *necessary*, contrary to the arguments of those who taunt Jesus and would have him circumvent the cross with a miraculous saving of himself. The "belief" which such a trick would effect would not go sufficiently to the heart of the matter. The necessity of the cross to make the point, and so to effect a new creation, is judgement upon our presumptions to know, to be able to set the criteria by which the things of God can be judged (here, proof of righteousness by miraculous demonstration). Righteousness is not inherent in our predictable politics or theologies.

To return to the specific issue of violence, a further observation arising from reflection on the cross is required here: "the obvious" is one of the conditions for violence. The violence of the cross is the fruit of the obvious religious heresy of Jesus for the Jews and the obvious political irrelevance of Jesus for the Romans. Our declarations about the world, implicitly claimed to be self-evident, may effectively rationalise what are in fact violent words or actions..

The "word of the cross", then, points to violence's blindness to what it is. This is revealed in the violence done to Jesus on account of the theologically (politically) "obvious". The justification which arises in the cross is linked to the violence of the cross, and arises for Jesus' persecutors to the extent that they recognise themselves as having put to Jesus the challenge to prove

himself and avoid the cross by doing what is "obviously" required ("come on down"!), and yet what would have been inadequate for the task of the revelation of God-and-world. That is, justification is ours in Jesus to the extent that we recognise our own violence, or, in order to avoid the conclusion that we *earn* our justification through analysis of our violence, justification is the grace which *reveals* to us our own violence. The specifically theological work which might be done in relation to the contemporary rhetoric of violence is to identify in violence what it cannot identify in itself – its ubiquity – an achievement which might at least moderate the counter-rhetoric of violence in our political and social discourse.

This may be considered a basically negative theological achievement: what is clear to us is not thereby right. However, the work of the church is *not* to accuse the world, for it can only make such observations on account of having been itself "accused" in the evangelical act. The church's work is "simply" to name who is God (and is not); again, this is uniquely done in the church because of the centrality of the cross in its experience of God, for the God of the cross is not obvious.

The second question in relation to theological work on the rhetoric of violence is the "why" of the work itself. What is the purpose, for the church and for the world, of looking to analyse violent posturing? Simply recognising the violence in ourselves would be a wholly pessimistic achievement if that were all we achieved.

The specifically Christian theological insight brought to the question of the rhetoric of violence is the identification of the measure of all things in the dynamic of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. However, this is not simply a "measure", qualitative or quantitative. What a theology of the cross offers in the political sphere is effectively an *anthropology* of the cross – that is, an *ethic*, a way of being in the world. To ask about "Christ among the powers" is to ask how we live in the world – how those whose lives have begun to be marked by the experiences of Jesus Christ will themselves live. The theology of the cross is certainly a *theology* – concerned with the identification of God. This identification, however, is made in the whole of human existence, and so a concern with theology and the rhetoric of violence is a concern with political existence: how does one who believes herself to be marked by (*this*) God's drawing of humanity into the humanity of Christ live with others who are also incompletely drawn into that humanity? In a

violent world, in which violence we all have a share because of what seems "obvious" to us, how may we act? Looking to the nature of violence and our complicity in it, a theological anthropology based on the theology of the crucified God should seek to delineate what can and can't be said about our actions and our words, and yet how we might nevertheless act and speak "justly". The challenge is to speak and live a human existence which acknowledges the possibility of violence in all human exchange, and yet rests in the grace of God, without justifying violence or implying that human suffering from human hands is simply docetic.

The presentation of the possibility of such an existence is the positive theological achievement of the word of the cross. The revelation by the cross of the ubiquitous nature of violence, or at least the potential of violence in all human action, is coincident with the justification offered to those who have been violent. Accusation and justification coincide in the encounter with the risen*, crucified* Jesus. This justification is not permission to be violent, but a proleptic, promised liberation from the effects of the violence in ourselves and in others. The confession that God justifies and calls the world to justice is made by those who also confess their need for justification. Calls to non-violence which arise from the hearing of the gospel amount to testimony to the justifying will of God and cannot be construed as the righteousness of the church itself.

The dual nature of Christian confession (confession of faith, confession of sin) is the fundamental content of the anthropology of the cross which arises from the theology of the cross: that human beings may live as simultaneously broken and healed. Our inability to avoid the potentially violent outcomes of our words and actions is not a reason not to speak or act. To live in grace is to accept conjoining with the broken and healed body of Christ and to participate with God in being conformed to the image of Christ. "Christ among the powers" is Christ among us, naming and renaming us in law and gospel, ultimately to the glory of the God who is recreating the world. Christian ethical existence springs from the justifying action of God, and always points back to that action.

Attention to the rhetoric of violence in the world is, properly, not so much a necessary work of the church as it is unavoidable if the church is the church of the gospel. The naming of the powers arises from an experience of liberation from those powers, and a desire not to be re-

enslaved which is met in the naming of that power which ultimately matters. The church's political rhetoric and action – within and without - is, properly conceived, a secularising of itself and the world, a stripping of the attributes of divinity from what is otherwise "obvious" (and *so* "righteous"), and yet ultimately not divine at all. As such, any discussion of violence from the perspective of Christian confession needs to ask suspicious questions about the presumed nature of violence and the presumed identities of the violent. At the same time, the positive dimension of the church's attention to violence is the expression of a con-fidence in the God-given possibility that the violent might yet live justified.