

Changing the world in a Therapeutic Culture

Psalm 9:7-12; Romans 12:9-21

Sunday 9th June 2024

Introduction

We're coming to the end of a series on "Distinctives" – thinking about ways in which Christians are called to be different to the surrounding culture.

And we've based our sermon titles on this book by Vaughan Roberts: "Distinctives" which was a great book - 24 years ago. But it's been an intriguing journey to read some of these chapters and realise how much the world has changed.

"APATHY ON CAMPUSES"

So in the Chapter we were going to do tonight was called "*Wholeheartedness in a World that can't be bothered*". Writing in 2000 Vaughan Roberts starts by saying, "Universities used to be hotbeds of social activism. But now we see widespread apathy. Without Christianity, our young people no longer a purpose to live for – or a purpose to die for anymore. But Jesus gives at that purpose."

DURHAM – IT WAS TRUE

And certainly, he had a point back then. I was at university between 2001-2004. I was at Durham University and St John's College. And those not familiar with Durham, St John's College also contains ordination college, and so there's a strong Christian ethos in that campus, and many Christians choose to go there, and I would estimate when I was there about 60% of the undergraduate students – that's not including the ordinands – just normal students – about 60% of us would identify as Christian.

And what was notable was, that even though it was the second smallest of 13 Durham colleges, St John's vastly over-represented in student bodies across the university. And it became a whole thing of "let's try and get John's students on everything" – they called it "Operation Johnification".

And so back then, I saw very clearly there was a connection between Christianity and Activism. It was the Christians getting out there trying to change the world around them.

NOT ANY MORE

But not any more - unless you've just ignored the news for the last 8 years, there is no way we can say any more there is apathy in the nation, that our young people don't care about justice, that people aren't willing to make sacrifices for a cause any more.

There is no way that Activism in and of itself is a Christian distinctive.

- We had 2016 Brexit and the protests that entailed.
- Then out of the pandemic we had the MeToo movement that started in the US.
- The "Everyone's invited" movement which was UK-based protest movement against sexual harassment in Secondary schools
- We have the Rise of Black Lives Matter with the death of George Floyd, which was felt very keenly in the UK.
- We've seen protests on campus about the Israel-Palestine War, not only in Harvard but also in the UK.
- In fact on UK magazine last month featured this on its cover:
"Drama Students – How universities raised a generation of Activists."
- We've in the UK climate protests, particularly "Just Stop Oil", disrupting, plays, sporting events, traffic.

And in fact “Just Stop Oil” was so controversial, another group started, “Just Stop Just Stop Oil” as an activist group against Just Stop oil.

And we have a short video about them now... these are just some snippets from their online video.

<Just Stop Just Stop Oil.>

If you want to see the fun and games they got up to, then just go to Youtube and type “Just Stop Just Stop Oil” It’s good fun!

It is impossible to say we live in an apathetic culture!

HOW DO WE RESPOND? – WE SHARE SOME THINGS, NOT OTHERS

So, question – how do we respond to this new wave of Activism we’re seeing across the Western World?

You’ll see in that video that group we’re reflecting saying, “we’re sort of on the same side as those we see protesting – and yet we’re also not.”

And as Christians perhaps we look at this world of protest, and think:

- I believe in making a difference.
- I believe in a Just society.
- I believe that we should be a voice for those who have no voice.

But.. what does it mean to do this distinctively as Christians?

What is it about our story – the gospel story of Jesus Christ – that tells us how to go about this?

I want to call tonight:

Changing the world in a Therapeutic Culture

That is to say that:

Yes, Christians are called to make a difference in this world and be active participants in healing and helping communities.

But we do this in a culture that has been called by some commentators, a “Therapeutic Culture.”

We are in an age where what makes “me, me” is my inner testimony of who I am.

The inner man is the true man.

“The World out there” - its job is to make me feel good about that.

And the role, then, of politics, of education, of entertainment – is to affirm my inner reality.

And so we see in our world that those aspects of Christianity that do that, are taken, and then they mixed in with contemporary values. Which is why it’s so hard for the church today to figure out, “how should I be distinctive?”

So tonight, as we think about activism, I want to quickly run through, using Psalm 9:

- Three Christian values which activist culture affirms.
- How each of these values is re-interpreted by therapeutic culture.
- And what is the Christian distinctive.

And then just briefly at the end, use Romans 12 to talk about what that might look like.

So here we go, firstly:

1) Justice

Western Culture says:

We believe in Justice

And Christians say, “Yes, we believe in Justice as well”

And in fact – secular Western culture got that idea from Christianity.

If you believe that the world is an accident and we are the product of years and years of unintentional biological processes to claim any real sense why one clump of cells should dominate another clump of cells.

Western Culture believes in Justice because we recognise that it’s good for us.
That is makes us more human.

But let’s make it even more Therapeutic:

We believe in Justice ... and reality is ours to shape.

Question: but who gets to decide?

In a Therapeutic Culture – we do! Because if somebody else gets to decide they might not be affirming. So we decide.

But, what we’re noticing is that when no-one gets to decide, and everyone gets to decide, you run up against all sorts of contradictions.

The theologian Carl Trueman was on a recent podcast and he commented on the campus demonstrations in Harvard, that there was a sign saying, “Queers for Palestine”. And he said, “Hang on a minute, what would happen if LGBTQ people actually went to Israel? Do they think they’d be safer with Hamas or with the Israelis? The only thing that combines those two groups is their sense of common enemy.”

In other words the justice that is being espoused is simply an expression of those groups we feel good or bad about, but ends up being utterly incoherent within itself, because it is a **Justice severed from any sort of sacred order**. It’s not a Justice written into the reality of the way things are.

There are many types of Justice:

Amos 5 says that “there are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground.”

Justice is a world that is empty until it is filled with values and agreement about the nature of the reality of things.

Should anyone be allowed to marry anyone else?

Should a person be free to choose assisted suicide?

Is it right to refuse a biological man access to women’s space?

And the first distinctive of Christians Justice is that we come from the position that

The World is God’s and Justice belongs to Him

Psalm 9:

*8 He rules the world in righteousness
and judges the peoples with equity.*

God has created the World.
God has established the “Way things are”.
And so any justice we espouse for has to start with God’s Justice.

We believe in Justice – but one that belongs to God.

Secondly:

2) We believe in advocacy...

Advocacy means to speak up for others. To invest yourself in the needs of others.
To be one who stands in the gap between the oppressed and powerless and those who have power.

And it is clear that the secular West believe that advocacy is important – speaking up for other people. Putting ourselves in the place of others.

Identifying in their suffering.

Whether it’s “Queers for Palestine”

Whether it’s Greta Thunberg and the Climate protests

Whether it’s “Je suis Charlie”

But what happens to advocacy is combined with a therapeutic culture? It starts to tip into this:

We believe in advocacy... when it gives me a sense of substance.

Now – I don’t want tonight to lead to an undue suspicion of everyone out there who’s trying to change the world – all of us doing so imperfectly.

But there is a lot of commentary and observation that increasingly what we see as advocacy is often marked by being performative and unsacrificial:

Performative in that its end point seems to be about putting on a show more than actual engagement with the problems at hand (we have this phrase (“virtue-signalling”))

And **Unsacrificial** in that we expect someone else to take the burden for the problems we’re campaigning upon – and indeed the cost of the campaign.

COLOMBIA UNIVERSITY

There was a video that circulated at a Pro-Palestine demonstration at Colombia university – where they’d camped out and caused all sorts of problems for the university faculty – and the spokeswoman for the protestors got up and said, “We would like a commitment that the university is going to provide us with food and water while we make life difficult for you.”

And she invoked the language of extreme poverty, “we’re asking basic for **basic humanitarian aid.**”

And one reporter said, “you’ve put yourselves very deliberately in this situation, it seems that you’re want to be revolutionary, we want to take over this building, and then saying now make us comfortable.”

BIBLE – EMPTYING

The Bible's vision of advocacy is patterned after the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's read two verses from Psalm 9:

*9 The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.*

If our God is a refuge for the oppressed, then God's people are called to be a refuge for the oppressed. And that part is not controversial – I'm sure there are many communities of all faiths and none that would aspire to look after their poor. But here's the distinctive:

*11 Sing the praises of the Lord, enthroned in Zion;
proclaim among the nations what he has done.
12 For he who avenges blood remembers;
he does not ignore the cries of the afflicted.*

That verse 12 resonates with the language of the very first victim in Scripture of injustice: Abel, the brother of Cain, in Genesis 4. After Cain has killed Abel God says:

Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.

And Psalm 9 tells us: he who avenges blood remembers: he does not ignore the cries of the afflicted.

And so the question is, how does God finally hear the voices of the oppressed?
How does God enact Justice?

That theme, this thread continues all the way to the New Testament – and see how the book of Hebrews here reflects the New Testament vision of Psalm 9:

Hebrews 12:23-24

You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

How does God remember the oppressed?
How does God enact Justice?

Through the blood of Jesus, that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Why a better word? Because the blood of Abel spoke to God the judge for the purpose of justified condemnation to Cain.

But the blood of Jesus speaks to God the Judge for the purpose of forgiveness and redemption.

Question: How does God enact justice? How does God attend to the needs of the afflicted? By making himself nothing and giving himself to death.

Advocacy in today's world is increasingly about filling ourselves up with a sense of substance and purpose.
Advocacy in the Christian story starts from the place of emptying ourselves for the sake of those in need.

**Does our Activism there to make us “into” something?
Or to head us the way of the cross?**

RWANDA TRIP

One of the most incredible bits of advocacy, of “standing in the gap” that I witnessed in ministry life was on a Mission Trip with my previous church. Our church had a connection with ministries out in Rwanda, and that was through missionary couple, who had been medical missionaries out in the country for ten years in the 70s and 80s.

Then, as many of you will know, in 1994 the Rwandan Genocide took place, where it’s estimated the 800,000 people were killed by their own countrymen. And following the genocide this couple started visiting the country again, every few months or so, to minister to those who were left. The origins of that genocide have their roots in white colonialism – Europeans who came to the country in the 1930s who segregated and discriminated against certain tribes.

In Summer 2011 we took a group of young people out to Rwanda, and we were staying on the site of a church that had specific ministry to those living victims of the genocide. Those who had lost husbands and wives, those who had lost children, those who had lost limbs, those who had lost their dignity and felt shame. And 17 years later, still felt the trauma of that time.

And we saw as part of those services, part of the advocacy ministry of our missionary friend. And at those services, we saw this now quite frail doctor now in his 70s, come before these victims, kneel down in front of them, and repent on behalf of the Westerners for their part in this atrocity.

*And we saw how that was healing to their souls.
Someone sees.
Someone sees that there is blood to be avenged.
Someone is willing to take responsibility for these sins.
Someone is willing to wear these sins.
And someone is willing to abase himself for my healing.*

*He was being Jesus to them,
He was being an advocate to them.
And he was doing it not by putting on a show that pumped his pride and comfort.*

*It struck me that it takes very little physical sacrifice to kneel down.
It struck me that it took very little time for him to speak the words he spoke.
It struck me that it didn’t involve him going without food, or water, or freedom.*

The only thing this act really cost him was pride.

And whether or not a Christian act of advocacy costs very much or very little, the pattern of Jesus is that it starts by emptying ourselves.

And in an age where we can claim the most power according to how much victimhood we can claim – the difference between these two postures of advocating can be very hard to discern.

We believe in advocacy... when it gives me a sense of substance.

We believe in advocacy... shaped by the marks of the cross.

Finally

3) Progress – The coming Kingdom

We believe in progress.

That the world is heading to a meaningful conclusion.

And this may strike you as an odd or obvious thing, but Christianity in this respect is separate from some Eastern Religions, that talk about “the circle of life” – that reality is really just going in circles, repeating itself.

Or indeed atheism, which says that the universe will simply descend into cold, pitiless indifference.

But Christianity – not unique – offers a view of human history that is a story with a beginning, middle and a meaningful, optimistic end.

Psalms 9:7 affirms:

7 The LORD reigns forever;
he has established his throne for judgment.

The Missionary Lesslie Newbigin pointed out in 1989 that:

The period in which the wealth and power of the nations now called ‘developed’ were generated was marked by a strong belief in the idea of progress... It was no accident that this belief developed within the society shaped by Christian teaching. Its roots are in the Biblical vision of a meaningful history.

And so we say, with our culture, “Yes, let’s hope for a meaningful future...”

But the therapeutic culture says:

We believe in progress.

... and a future that must be built up with our own hands.

In other words, we will be our own Saviours, our own masters.

Let’s build ourselves a tower that will reach to the heavens.

But the Christian says:

We believe in progress.

... and future that will be come down as a gift of grace.

The tower of Babel in Genesis is built up.

The kingdom of God in Revelation comes down.

Therefore... all that we do on this earth is readying ourselves for a salvation to be received.

All the advocacy we do is tempered by an understanding that we will never do it all.. but that our ultimate hope rests on God and His salvation.

APPLICATION

And that idea actually puts appropriate limits on our activism, and the means by which we change the world:

We're going to turn and think of some applications now from Romans 12, but you cast your eye down to the end of that passage, you see verse 19 says, **"Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay."**

And the rest of that section is about returning evil for good.

The fact that salvation belongs to God – and judgement belongs to God – means that in our advocacy we don't put ourselves in the place of God. We advocate as those who are a waiting people.

HOW DO I CHANGE THE WORLD?

So, here we come to think about – ok, how then, I do change the world in the therapeutic culture?

How are Christians called to do this in a distinct way?

And I think the first thing to say is that the danger with sermons like these that are critiquing culture – which we have to do – is that we go away with a message of, "great, we have the answer and they don't."

And it is true that often half-Christianity is worse than no Christianity.

But our response to seeing what's going on in the world can't be a smugness or complacency.

It is a very Christian duty to be changing our world, remaking it, advocating for justice in light of the hope we have.

So what does that look like?

There will be all sorts of ways in which you will do this through your jobs – which for most of you is your main ministry in life – your work.

Some of you will be involved in Justice and Advocacy organisations.

Some of you will be giving time, money and prayers.

We may be signing petitions and so forth.

But the reason I wanted to draw our attention to Romans 12 at the end of this talk is that the heart of Christian Activism is mostly mediated through the life of the church.

The reason being that true justice starts at relationship level.

In the same podcast I mentioned earlier Carl Trueman was commenting on a case of a 32 year old woman who wants to end her life. And observing that, clearly this woman doesn't have strong relational ties – there's nothing in her asking about how her decision will affect her friends, her loved ones. And he said this:

"I can't stop laws on assisted suicide.. I can stop people thinking that they need that option, because they have meaningful lives connected to others." (Carl Trueman 46:20ish).

And we can consider many similar phrase to this:

We can't stop laws on abortion.. but we can provide communities where single mothers are supported.

We can't undo laws concerning marriage... but we can be a community that stops singleness feeling like a punishment.

We can't change laws on taxes... but we can provide communities where the poor are looked after through relationships rather than handouts.

Justice enacted through relationship – and where are relationships reconciled? In the Church.

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Friends – these are the instructions for how Christian Justice is administered. What it looks like.

Where we seek justice like rivers, founded in God's creation order.

Where we identify with the needy, and serve with cross-shaped love.

And where we preach the coming kingdom and give people a hope to live and die for.

But it only works if we're actually doing it, of course.

And here's the challenge for you and for me – if you're a Christian tonight.

A final humbling thought.

LGBTQ...

There has been quite a lot of commentary over the last decade asking the question:

How did the LGBTQ movement win over the entirety of Western Culture?

The Sexual revolution has been unprecedented in its speed and scope.

And it's not an exaggeration to say the rainbow flag has won the West – at least for the time being.

How did they do it?

There are two answers that are often given:

Firstly – it happened one coffee at a time. In other words, it was a relational movement before it was a political one.

Secondly - Some commentators point towards the aids crisis in the late 80s, where many gay men were dying from AIDS (frequently caused by promiscuity).

And on the Television screens the world saw the community of gay men weeping with one another – **mourning with those who mourn. Being devoted to one another – as it says in Romans 12.** Committed to one another even unto death. And they saw this community - in some ways - acting more like the church ought to be than the actual church was.

And that community dynamic was powerful. The testimony of their love for one another was compelling and changed perspectives.

Friends – how do we change the world in a therapeutic culture?

We start by thinking less about ourselves and more about the world.

We commit ourselves to the love of God, who Judges Justly.

We make friends with people not like ourselves.

We rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.

We become devoted to one another.

We keep our spiritual fervour.

We open the doors of the kingdom of God on earth.

As we wait for the heavenly hope.

Let's pray.