

Divine Love, Universal Compassion

A Sermon by Chris Moore, July 31, 2011

Few of us today would associate God with a giant crane. But there was a time when people did - A time when going to theatre was as religious an activity as coming here on Sunday morning. It is from religion our modern theatre was born. In ancient Greece, when a plot line became too complex or the situation became far too desperate, they invented what would eventually become known as "Deus ex Machina". A God or goddess would step in at the end, and make everything alright. Of course a God doesn't simply walk out on stage. So the Greeks actually created cranes to lower actors from above to the accompaniment of loud thunder and flashes of light. And thus the stage direction "Deus ex Machina", "God from machine" was born.

In the middle of my university studies in Drama (and English), I took a break to do some soul searching. A search that would lead me to the Holy Land itself. This is the first I have ever talked publicly about my experiences in the holy land. Largely because I was afraid that the political controversy forming the backdrop to these events would overwhelm, what was for me, a deeply spiritual journey. But it is not always possible to separate the spiritual from the political. In fact that was one of the lessons I would have to learn that day. The only disclaimer I would add is the events about to be related are over twenty years old. It would be unfair to use them as a basis for political commentary on the situation as it stands today.

Early January, 1989, the second year of the first Intifada or "Uprising" among the Palestinians; I was taking a stroll through East Jerusalem, only blocks from the famed "Road to Damascus". It was a normal busy day with crowded shops and open air markets. Out of nowhere, tear gas clouds billowed up from the pavement, first one, then another, and another. This left shoppers scrambling to get inside the stores and off the street. Now, on several previous occasions, I had deliberately visited known areas of conflict so I could see for myself what was actually happening in this conflict. This part of Jerusalem, though mostly Palestinian, was normally rather quiet. This was not supposed to be one of those areas. None of this was expected here. What made it stranger still, was the absence of any visible sign of provocation. Moments later, a group of a dozen riot police marched past me. But where was the riot??

I followed behind at a distance. They came to a Palestinian baker who was selling bread from a horse drawn cart. They surrounded him and began beating at the cart with their clubs. Having already witnessed confrontations between the two sides, I knew there was a predictable pattern of escalation. And I had already seen too much. This wasn't supposed to be happening here. Slowly a horrible thought began to dawn on me. In spite of all my tearful, heartfelt prayers over the last few days, for an end to the violence, and my fervent prayers on the spot now, there was no Deus Ex Machina. No deity was going to come from the heavens and make everything all right. And I began to wonder, how, in the very birth place of God as it is known in the west, that the love of god could be so painfully

absent? Where in God's own land was the love of god? I began to weep openly in distress and in despair, there on the street.

'Til it hit me. It was an inner realisation that struck with the force of divine revelation. Divine love, sweet holy love, was not absent after all. It still lived in the one place it always had.... In me. There was still one place filled with compassion - my own heart. If the light of beautiful, holy love was to shine forth, then it would have to come from me. So with my typically Canadian naivety and politeness I approached one of the officers, just as he moved to strike the baker.

"Slica, Adoni" I asked in Hebrew, "Excuse me Sir"... " Lamah?" meaning "Why?"

The officer turned to face me. Soon the others were also gathered around me. Then a number of plain clothes officers. So a crazy Canadian tourist and a group of angry police officers began a conversation. The police had come to forcibly enact some sort of curfew or lock down of the area. But they themselves had no idea why this had to be. Eventually the conversation ended. The police decided to go down the street demanding the closure of all the businesses along the street. But where ever a store keeper out rightly refused, the officers would look over their shoulders to see me watching. Then they would simply force the metal shutters on the outside of the store window shut and walk over to the next store, hoping for a more co-operative response. But I should tell you that before my conversation with the officers ended there were three occasions where it got quite heated and almost ended in my being beaten. Twice, frustrated officers attempt to spin and raise their foot in a bid to literally kick me in the head. Both times ended with the officer responsible tripping over themselves and falling onto the street. Prior to this, another had raised his club in the air ready to strike, but somehow his arm seemed frozen in the air. Whether the officers where restrained by some invisible hand or simply by their own conscience, I will leave to you. Nevertheless, a miracle happened that afternoon. But the miracle is not in the events described so far. It was not in what happened. It was in what did NOT happen. There would be no escalation; No brick throwing youths appeared, no gasoline bombs were thrown. No heavily armed police with assault rifles were called in to support the riot cops. No gun toting Hamas militants appeared on the scene. No one was beaten, or injured, no one was arrested, or detained, and no one was shot or killed.

The lessons of that day are still unfolding for me 22 years later. But one of the most important: Miracles don't happen because some deity decides to take action. Miracles happen when WE decide to act. *I learned that* it is impossible to love one's neighbour and yet ignore the social, political and economic causes behind his or her plight. *I learned that* love and compassion are real and tangible forces in our universe, with the power to make real differences, to change and even save lives, and alter the course of events; *that there is only one path to the divine, path of love and compassion the.* *The rest is just window dressing.*

2600years ago, the Buddha began proclaiming what would become known as the Dharma. His teachings written down in a series of documents called the Sutras, the sacred

texts of the Buddhists.

In one of the Sutras, the Diamond Sutra, the Buddha is asked by one of his closest companions and disciples, what is the essential part of his teaching? What's it that should be transmitted to future generations? The Buddha announced that the way to the highest most perfect wisdom, the way to become a living Buddha is to show compassion without attachment.

So important, so fundamental was this teaching that the Buddha declared that where this sutra was taught, that place was forever, holy ground. Compassion, love for all sentient beings is at the very foundation of Buddhist teaching.

Witchcraft is a strange and controversial tradition. And a very loaded term, often much misunderstood, even by some who profess to follow it. But did you know that even witches have a commandment regarding universal love? It is a fact that is largely overlooked. Writers on the subject of the craft prefer its more exotic and mysterious qualities. Many claim that modern Wicca, the religion that grew out of witchcraft, while very ethical, has no moral commandments received from the divine. But that is simply not true. There is at least one moral commandment that has come down. I can phrase it in exactly three words.

“Love all beings”.

Love

all beings, full stop. There are no exceptions, exclusions, or exemptions of any kind. All beings- including our mother earth herself, and all other creatures, who like us, are her children.

Today, as you may have noticed, I have a tomato sitting on the pulpit with me. Doubtless many are wondering why. Well I will tell you. Sometime ago, our congregation's Green Team began collecting our organic food waste and turning it into compost. The compost was in turn used to fertilize a vegetable garden planted at the rear of building. This Tomato is the first fruit to be harvested from our garden. With the reaping of this tomato, this eve of August, It is with great honour that I announce to you, as was done in times past, the beginning of our community's harvest season. It not only symbolizes, it *is* the physical manifestation of the love, compassion and care many among us have for the earth. I want to acknowledge their contribution and to say thank you to them; so, thank you. Thank you for your love and the example you set before us.

Author and professor of Religious studies, Karen Armstrong, gave this year's Wade lecture at the Unitarian Universalist Assoc.'s General Assembly in the U.S. Karen Armstrong spoke for almost an hour on how the ethic of compassion was a part of many world religions. She's written whole books on the subject! Most importantly she is the key force behind the Charter for Compassion, a declaration that calls on all religions to make compassion its primary spiritual focus. This document has been signed by representatives of all the world's major religions and a host of other dignitaries; Salman Ahmed, described by Al Jazeera as one of Southeast Asia's most popular singers; The Arch Bishop of Canterbury; Bishop Desmond Tutu; His Holiness, the Dalai Lama; Sir Richard Branson; the former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela; and most recently, ahumm, by Chris Moore. You are quite welcome, by the way, to add your own name. The Charter and website are in the Order Of Service.

Yet in spite of all the press and widespread agreement on the importance of love and compassion, our world still seems to be rather short on supply. But why?

From early childhood we are taught that love is a reciprocal arrangement. Our parents love us, we love back. And if in any of our relationships through life, this arrangement is not the case, we eventually come to feel emotionally scarred as a result. We become love's seekers. Seeking to fill the void created by whatever relationship has failed to provide the love we so desperately need. Even if we are whole and feel the love of those around us, we are still conditioned to see love as a reciprocal arrangement. But the commandment is not, "Thou Shalt be Loved". That is why the Buddha added that such compassion must be without any attachment. We are to act in love even though there is no hope of it even being acknowledged, let alone being reciprocated. How else could we love our enemies or even total strangers?

This may seem a tall order. But this doesn't have to take all that much, or be all that grand. One of the greatest beacons of compassion I have ever met was a quadriplegic man in his 70's who also had a developmental disability; a man barely able to move and barely able to speak. Yet when he did speak, it was with an amazing sense of humour. And he was always willing to listen to the woes of others. In the service of compassion we are all capable of making a contribution. Motivated by love, no kind gesture is too small.

I challenge each of you to take up the Charter for Compassion, individually. On a community scale, you're challenged to form what are called a Circles of Compassion. These small discussion circles are being established around the globe to give mutual support to those who are seriously making compassion the centre of their spirituality. These can also be used in the planning of any group action or activities.

We must all act, and also encourage others to act, in loving compassionate ways. Loving compassion has always been in great demand. But that demand grows ever stronger with each passing day. I ask you to stand with me and countless others around the globe who have consciously chosen to make loving compassion the centre of their spiritual being and the guiding force in their lives. Thank You.