

George Euling

Papua New Guinea, 1998

Violence and victims of violence

Experiences from Papua New Guinea

topics

- violence in Papua New Guinea's society
- reasons for violence
- theological perspective on violence

source: *Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling No 4, 1998; pp 44-46*

Setting the scene

Violence in Papua New Guinea can be seen from four different occurrences. The four occasions would define violence as having both the positive and negative objectives.

(1) Violence as the only voice that can be heard

The government of Papua New Guinea has not been very transparent. Its decisions do not reflect the concern for the welfare of the people. Its leadership on a number of occasions has been seen as possessing benevolent dictatorial qualities. The curtailment of the rights of the people to express themselves freely and the move to legislate against the freedom of the press has inflated the frustrations of the masses. In March of this year, the army gained wide support from the masses calling for the resignation of the Prime Minister. There was escalated violence right throughout the country in support of the call by the army for the leadership of the government to step down from office. Stores were looted, factories were burned, and there was confrontation between the police and the masses who had the support of the army. Scores of people were injured. The people can no longer put up with the government. They chose to voice their concern through violence. While violence can not be condoned it occurred as the only voice that can be heard.

(2) Violence as a form of ritual towards manhood

A tribe in Papua New Guinea practices verbal and physical abuse (what can be seen by outsiders as such) as a form of training of its male members. Such training begins when the child is weaned. The objective of the training is to have the candidate become a fearless warrior. The child is trained to be able to bear psycho-

logical and physical difficulties as he stands on the open field in the presence of the enemy.

(3) Violence as a form of payback and retribution

Daniel Miti was a village magistrate for more than ten years. He upheld the course of justice with both vigour and zeal. Last year he was punched to death by men who could not put up with his zeal to see that justice is done.

(4) Violence that does not see reason

Joseph Thomas was a car sales representative in Lae. He had the tendency of beating his wife each time he came home drunk. On one occasion he slashed his wife's arm with a knife. The wife did not have any food on the table for him. He never gave any money to his wife in the first place for food.

A Papua New Guinean perspective

(1) Emergence of violence

Much of violence that happens in Papua New Guinea can be blamed on the economic difficulties and political indecisiveness and corruption among leaders. People turned to violence with the hope that the leaders will at least hear them and their cry to be served with the basic necessities. They need lighting and power, improved sanitation and water for their household.

The inequality between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' left the 'have nots' no option but to turn to violence so that they too can share the wealth of the country even though its legitimacy is questionable. Violence becomes spontaneous. The masses need no persuasion. The frustration of having to pay a higher cost of a good or a service with money that they do not have in the first place drives them towards a unified stand against leadership and authority.

(2) Options toward resolving violence

Violence in contemporary Papua New Guinea is modelled and fed by the inequality in the distribution of wealth and services; the down turn in the economy; the instability within government; the high unemployment rate etc. The current government has boasted of devising economic reforms as the means by which much of violence can be prevented. In the traditional setting, compensation is the answer towards preventing repetition of violence. But compensation is now commercialised. People demand huge sums of money for acts of violence that they had been the targets of.

The foundational issue: the fallen nature

Violence is fuelled by the desire to have. Man throughout ages struggles with the problem of discontentment. "I do not have. Therefore, I must add to my lack even if the means by which I choose to satisfy that lack are illegitimate." We begin to see that as we turn to the first pages of Genesis. Eve was not content with what

she had. She must obtain that which was within the restricted bounds. Her quest to satisfy that desire proved to be futile for mankind. But the quest for more is only but a symptom of the fallen nature of man.

She walked away from God. This is the foundational issue – the problem of sin. Man in his fallen nature lacks self control. He must have. He must kill to have. The perpetrator of violence always justify the means by which he gets what he wants. But this is the cost of choosing to live within the bounds of the foundational issue. Man will always seek to justify his actions. For this is what man would always do when God is made to play second fiddle. We see this all the time when we turn the pages of the Old Testament. When people walked away from God, they acted within the bounds of the fallen nature. When they come back in perspective with God, they were able to experience Shalom.

The ‘foundational sacrifice’¹

(1) *Jesus the immortalised victim?*

The EMTV news each night would give accounts of rapes, day light bank robberies at commercial banks in Papua New Guinea, people die at the hands of rascals, women raped, house broken into, tribal wars, corruption at the high places etc. The embassies of foreign governments advice their citizens living within Papua New Guinea not to venture out when night falls. Violence seemed to escalate at an alarming rate. No one feels safe any more. Will I be the next victim of violence would be the question that people ask. We live in Papua New Guinea by looking over our shoulders.

When will all these acts of madness end? The “how” is a struggling question the government grapples with.

Jesus Christ died at the hands of a mob rule. He could be seen as a “victim” of anarchy. And therefore, that qualifies him as another “immortalised victim”. But the only difference is that he was more than a victim. He did not just die on the cross as a result of human madness. Victims of any violence do not have the power to say no. They never chose to be in the predicaments they found themselves in. And because the power to say no is not theirs to utter or disburse, that invokes society’s ability to act. Society immortalises its victims. It responds by putting into place social nets that would prevent the repetition of acts of violence. Jesus had the power to say no to the cross. He cried, “My Father, if it is possible may this cup be taken away from me. Yet not as I will but as you will.” (Matthew 26). Jesus had a mission. He was set on fulfilling that mission. The foundational cause of violence must be rendered powerless. It must end. His was a sacrificial death that expresses authentic love. This invokes Him to act. He expressed the eternal love of God on the cross for us.

(2) *Jesus is not the victim of sadistic passion*

¹ With “foundational sacrifice”, the author refers to Rene Girard’s theory on violence. Cf. the essays of R. Schwager and H.M. Gutmann in this workbook, pp. **Fehler! Textmarke nicht definiert.** and **Fehler! Textmarke nicht definiert.**

Each time someone dies a violent death in the hands of his neighbour, we are shocked and we experience the numbness of the soul. We ask why. This is because we experience violence that is devoid of reason. We say “no, it can not be real.” With Jesus, we cry “thanks be to God, to the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” We are captivated by the glory of the cross. For it is there that the Love of God is seen and experienced. It was because of His mercy and compassion for us that Jesus Christ had to die. We are drawn to the cross. With any victim of violence we repel the occasion. “No, it must not happen again” as we lament. Jesus cried on the cross “Father it is finished.” Jesus immortalised? No! His death was a calling. It was done within the bounds of reason and love. Jesus said “...I lay down my life ... no one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” This is authentic love.

Violence is devoid of authentic love. Victims suffer as a result of sadistic passion where the foundational cause of violence fills man with destructive emotions. Reason becomes obscured as a result of rejection of the will and the power to love. In other words, victims of violence were at the receiving end of passion that had its base outside reason and love. It could be described as madness. For violence is devoid of meaning. Victims of violent acts had their liberty and the right to enjoy and live life taken away from them. They suffer meaninglessly. Reason however causes us to make moral choices. These are choices that build relationships. John the Evangelist writes: “Beloved let us love one another, for love is from God; everyone who loves is from God and knows God. The one who does not love, does not know God for God is love.” Violence destroys the bond between reason and the ability to love. And the violator is filled with destructive emotion as he moves towards taking away the victim’s liberty to make real choices. But it is quite different with Christ Jesus. We are reminded by Scripture that part of the work of Christ is victory over passion. They nailed Him at the cross by passion. He overcame passion with dignity and humility. Violence, passion or madness (whatever one chooses to call) was conquered at Calvary.

Victory at the cross enables reason to function. When this happened, there is reconciliation and peace. Love there and then begins to extend its borders beyond corruption. It can no longer be obscured. The foundational cause of violence is offered a new status at the cross. There is transformation. Jesus Christ died a meaningful death. He offered freedom for the violators. And on the same token he offered consolation to victims.

Let me conclude with a poem that I wrote after the trip to Auschwitz/Poland last year in the Seminar. I experienced the numbness of my soul. I hope that it will express the struggle I had when I came face to face with violence that was methodical and industrial.

*For ever reason eludes me,
Where time stands still against the darkest hours of human experiences,
Faith and hope were their companions.*

*See and what do you see,
Hear and what do you hear,
were questions spoken from the depths of my spirit.*

*I looked to my friends
who were at the opposite borders*

*of the second world war;
Not of their doing, but was I not touched?*

*Humility clothed with modesty
Shines forth like a star in the twilight of the evening.*

*That in the darkest hours of one's experience,
Quietness and stillness before God
melts away the fury of the foe.*

*That a modest and a humble position
is a thousand words spoken with power
in the heat of a fury furnace.*

*An act of forgiveness
reaching out with understanding
open doors of hope of reconciliation.*

*And from within the aroma of unity rises
against tides of insanity.*

*And where was God in all this, I asked.
"I was there all the time,
Suffering with them, sustaining them.
My strength I gave them.
And my presence was ever there with them.
I love them.
Even death can not separate them from Me."*