

Reflection Notes – 22/1/17

- *Geoff Stevenson*

The Revolution/Reign of Love

The latest Star Wars movie, *Rogue One*, is out. I haven't seen it but the trailer opens with the narration declaring that 'The world is coming undone. Imperial flags reign across the galaxy.' The Death Star planet is being built and the Empire dominates through violence and power. I well remember that first movie, the story of which this latest predates. I remember the Stormtroopers led by Darth Vader, the rebels and Jedi Knights who used the Force. There was Yoda, Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia. Han Solo and Chewbacca, the Wookiee, joined the fight. It was all spacecraft and special effects, lightsabers and lasers. There was violence and destruction as the rebels fought the Empire to effect liberation and freedom. Empires and resistance, struggle and violence, a mythological story that repeats itself throughout history under different guises.

Last Monday was Martin Luther King Holiday in the USA and I thought about his leadership and the courageous Civil Rights Movement that fought for equality for all people regardless of race, gender or any other distinguishing feature. He too led a movement against the Empire where power and privilege controlled the status quo. Discrimination, violence and poverty were inflicted on people of colour by a white and powerful society. There was a major uprising against the 'Empire' that began on a bus when a black woman was too tired to get up and move. Rosa Parks was tired from the day; tired from life and tired from the abuse and prejudice, racism and exclusion. She was tired and would not move. The movement began and grew through black churches and other organisations and was supported by ethnic minorities and many white Americans joined in as well. King's credo was that they would not fight violence with violence. They would not match hatred with hatred but love their enemies even as they fought the attitudes and issues of racism and discrimination.

This story has also been repeated through the world. Ghandi, the diminutive Hindu lawyer who struggled in South Africa before returning to his native India, led the struggle against the Imperial power of Britain. There was power and violence but his resistance was not based on achieving superior power and might but through non-violent resistance and he gained much insight and inspiration from Jesus and particularly the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. Wherever the Empire, in whatever local form it takes, expresses itself in violence and domination there will be suffering and oppression. The indigenous populations throughout history hold the untold pain of struggle and suffering in their stories, afflicted as they have been by Empire's domination and power. Many have risen up under various leaders who have threatened the status quo and for a moment glimpsed the impossible possibility of freedom only to be vanquished, defeated and left for dead. The powers inflict intense suffering to make a show of their power and warn would-be rebels against such foolish action.

Such is the context for Jesus' life and mission. He lived under the powerful reign of Rome and its plethora of emperors and local rulers. Many were mad and their lust for power led them to brutal and bloodthirsty aggression against friend and foe – even family

members who threatened their rule. Those who challenged the status quo found their lives cut short by sword or spear or hung mercilessly on the rugged cross to die slowly and painfully in public view. This was the Empire in the local form of the 1st century, powerful, brutal and sophisticated. It grew through violence and threat, through domination and victory over weaker nations and foes. There were also good things that are attributed to Rome, building, aqueducts, roads... but violence domination defined Rome to the world around.

It was against this Empirical reality that Jesus, a small, somewhat insignificant rabbi hailing from the nowhere region of downtown Galilee, burst onto the religious scene and declared that the Empire of God – the Kingdom, Reign or perhaps Revolution, of God – was here! He waltzed out and made this startling declaration to all and sundry – well a small group of equally insignificant and powerless people. The Reign of God was here and everything will change because this Reign is grounded in a power far greater than the military might and power on display in Rome. It was/is grounded in Love – the Love that is God! It will be built on relationships and inclusive community where all can belong.

Jesus invited some ordinary, very ordinary, men to come and follow him on this mission. Twelve in all were especially called into the mission team but it was no exclusive group because really anyone could respond to Jesus at any time and join the revolution of Love. He lived and breathed and spoke the Reign of God into being in his own life and in the world in which he lived. It was a reign that embraced people in a strange, diverse inclusive community. This was no army but a rag-tag community in which people discovered life more abundant and joyful than they believed possible. The hungry had food that gave life; the thirsty drank deeply of water that satisfied body and soul; the lost and alone found a place, a people to belong to; the guilty and ashamed found forgiveness and a new start; the sick found healing and acceptance into the gracious community of God. The poor and lowly were lifted up and Jesus proclaimed how much God loved them. It was a revolution that gathered steam and one can see the seeds of this revolution in Ghandi and King and others.

This Revolution of Love turned the world upside down and inside out. As Jesus lived, spoke and acted through gracious acceptance and healing, people were drawn into this non-violent resistance of love and the movement grew out of control, as love always does. The local religious authorities were overwhelmed with fear. Their own power and privilege was threatened. Disorder and chaos threatened to unleash itself upon their neatly regulated world of religious structure. The Roman powers were drawn into the story as Jesus unleashed his rhetoric against all that demeaned, oppressed or caused violent suffering in the world. His life, words and courageous action remains as inspiration and challenge to us as we engage the powers of the world, empires rising and falling, unleashing their abusive violence on the weak or poor or unsuspecting who are in the way. The Revolution continues and The Reign of God stands strong and clear as an alternate path through life for all who have had enough of the status quo and want something that will change the world and bring peace, life, hope and joy in the power of God's Love – a force more powerful! Check the little story out in Matthew 4:12-23 (you can read more!) and come and join the Revolution of Love!