

25 December 2020

Isaiah 52:7-10

Hebrews 1:1-4

John 1:1-14

I want to talk about the “love speech” of God.

The recent release of the recommendations of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into last year’s Christchurch terrorist attacks has brought the topic of “hate speech” into renewed prominence. The term “hate speech” can be variously used, but typically refers to statements intended to demean another, the use of cruel and derogatory language on the basis of membership in a social group, communications of animosity or disparagement of an individual or a group on account of a characteristic such as race, colour, national origin, sex, disability, religion, or sexual orientation.¹ While the term “hate speech” has been around for a while, it has certainly risen to renewed prominence in New Zealand following the dreadful, hateful, Christchurch attacks. There has been considerable reflection on the experience of minority ethnic and religious communities. And this has in turn led to debate about whether law change might be needed.

The Royal Commission has now recommended repealing the Human Rights Act to "insert a provision ... for an offence of inciting racial or religious disharmony, based on an intent to stir up, maintain or normalise hatred, through threatening, abusive or insulting communications with protected characteristics that include religions affiliation".

And now the pros and cons of that recommendation are starting to be debated in opinion pieces and letters to the editor and so on.

Martin Luther King once wrote “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”²

Over against the increased prevalence of “hate speech” in the world we have the “love speech” of God.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hate_speech

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/376797-returning-hate-for-hate-multiplies-hate-adding-deeper-darkness-to>

At the start of his Gospel, John refers to Jesus, Son of God, as the Word.³ It seems an odd thing to say.

It appears John had searched around for a word he could use to say some important things about the one who is the subject of his book. Many Jewish teachers had grappled for centuries over questions like: How can the one true God be both different from the world and active within the world? How can the one true God be remote, holy, and detached, and also intimately present?

Some teachers had already spoken of 'word' and 'wisdom' as ways of answering these questions.

And as John read his Scriptures, the writings we call the Old Testament, he would have read of God regularly acting by *speaking*, by his 'word'. In the beginning God *said*, "Let there be light" and so on. Throughout Scripture God *calls* things into being; God *pronounces* judgement, God *declares* healing and blessing and life.

So what John is doing is taking this language about God and about God's activity, and using it to introduce someone profoundly important – Jesus. He wants his readers to understand that this Jesus, to whom he applies the idea of the 'Word', was and is God. In Jesus, God's Word has become flesh, has become human.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also talks of God speaking, saying that "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe." Persistently, faithfully, down the ages God has kept on reaching out to humankind, sending his message into the world. And Hebrews declares that finally it is in Jesus that we have the most direct speech from God of all.

So to me it seems fair enough to describe Jesus as the "speaking" or "speech" of God.

And what kind of speech does God make in Jesus?

It is "love speech".

³ Following draws heavily on Wright, *John*, pp.4-5

Jesus is God's love speech to the world.

If we were to look a little further on in John's Gospel we would read Jesus' famous words about his role and mission, and it is all about love:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)

Over against all the "hate speech" in the world we have the "love speech" of God.

Over against all the hate speech that divides people, speech that denigrates those that are regarded as "other", that incites violence against those who are different, those who are "not us" ... over against all this hate speech we have the love speech of God.

Over against all this hate speech we have the love speech of the God who desires bring all people into unity and peace, the God who is at work through Jesus and his Church to draw all people to himself, the God who adopts any who are willing into the family of God to be children of God.

As John writes:

In the beginning was the Word... In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ... He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:1,4-5,11-12)

In Jesus, the love speech of God has been declared to the world.

As I commented earlier, there is considerable debate about the prospect of new legislation being introduced to counter hate speech. Part of that debate revolves around the long-held principle of freedom of speech. Freedom to express oneself without fear of retaliation, censorship, or legal sanction is regarded as a fundament

right within a democratic society. It is recognised for example under article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is not an absolute right however, because of the possibility that harm can be caused through slander, obscenity, pornography, sedition, incitement to violence, copyright violation, unwanted disclosure of private information, and so on.⁴

This right to freedom of speech makes me think of free will. While God reaches out to all people in Jesus (God's love speech) longing that all would choose to respond, God does not compel that response. We have the freedom to choose how we answer God's call; we are free to choose what we say back to God.

But just as exercising freedom of speech has consequences, so too there are consequences to exercising our freedom as to how we respond to the love speech of God. The benefits of being children in the family of God are available to those who allow themselves to be adopted in – and that is a truly astonishing thing!. But if we choose to be outside of the family, then we cut ourselves off from those benefits.

It is a stark choice. In John's Gospel, just as Jesus expressed the lavish extent of God's love for the world, so too he goes on to express the starkness of the choice to be made:

Whoever believes in him [in God's son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. (John 3:18-21)

To be cut off from the light is to experience darkness; to cut oneself off from the source of life is to choose death; to cut oneself off from the Creator and sustainer of all things is to opt for ruin.

⁴ See Wikipedia article https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_speech

It is here that things get difficult because, for some, the expression of such a choice and its consequences is received as hate speech – it defines a group as being “not us”, which could cause offence or insult.

My purpose tonight is not to debate the ins and outs of various kinds of hate speech legislation. What I would note, however, is that there are a great many areas of life where it is not regarded as hate speech to point out beliefs about the consequences of our choices – it is not hate speech for doctors to opine on the consequences of our choices about diet and exercise; it is not hate speech for emergency service personnel to proffer suggestions about a link between alcohol consumption choices and accident rates; it is not hate speech for parents to suggest the likely consequences of their child’s choice to spend the days gaming rather than playing outdoors ...

The concern some express about this is that the push to legislate against hate speech could become a kind of hate speech in itself – incitement against those who, like me, hold that God loves the world so much that he gave his only Son, Jesus, that whoever receives him be given the right to become one of the children of God. It is an all-reaching love speech; but as we have freedom we can choose to receive it or to ignore or reject it.



At Christmas we come to see and worship a baby born and placed in a manger. This baby Jesus is however God’s Word to the world, God’s love speech to the world. I hope that this Christmas you hear God’s love speech for you, accept it, and share it with others. Our world filled with so much hate desperately needs this love speech.

Amen.

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