

The world that Jesus lived in was very different from ours – not only in language and lifestyle, but in what people believed about the universe. When people in Jesus’ time thought about the ‘world’ – they included not only the natural world that can be seen and touched, but also a spiritual world with hierarchies of angels and demons. They believed in the influence of the planets, in gods and demons and various invisible forces that acted in hidden ways. Their vision of the cosmos was much vaster and included many more dimensions than we can imagine. You could see their worldview as backward and superstitious, or you could see our vision as impoverished by comparison.

Today, most of us live in a world of physical things we can see and touch, that obey natural laws that we kind of understand. Most people don’t believe we are acted on by invisible forces. When we interact with someone, we don’t generally look for the influence of angelic or demonic spirits. When we go camping we don’t generally feel the need to appease the local gods of the place that we’re staying in. And while we’re beginning to try to approach health more holistically, the unseen world is not at the core of how we respond to sickness.

For us to understand the Gospels properly, we need to remember the fullness of the world that Jesus and the Gospel writers lived in. Sickness, and what the Bible calls demon possession, were hugely tied up with concepts of personal, intergenerational, and cultural sin, and the influence of huge and powerful forces beyond people’s control.

We also need a fuller idea of what Jesus meant by salvation. The good news of Jesus Christ is not just that our personal sin is forgiven, or that we get to go to heaven when we die. The good news of Jesus Christ, affirmed by the whole New Testament, is that Jesus in his life, death and resurrection, defeated an entire system of oppressive and dominating powers. As David Bentley-Hart puts it “the cosmos has been enslaved to death, both by our sin and by ...[Archons]...‘angelic’ or ‘daemonian’ agencies... Whether fallen, or mutinous, or merely incompetent, these [Archons] stand...between us and God. But Christ has conquered them all...[he] has vanquished all the Powers below and above that separate us from the love of God.”¹

¹ From an online article: <https://aeon.co/ideas/the-gospels-of-paul-dont-say-what-you-think-they-say>

When we understand the gospel like this, we can see Christ's healing miracles as signs of something better to come - signs that he would defeat death itself, and with it, a whole realm of 'principalities and powers' that destroy life. When people brought their sick to Jesus to be healed, they experienced something more than just cured bodies and minds – they glimpsed a world of freedom from all kinds of bondage and domination.

Okay, you might think, well that was them, their worldview, and that's how they told the story. How can we possibly apply this now, in our present world, with minds shaped by science, and modernity?

Firstly, some of us even now are part of cultures and worldviews that acknowledge those things we can't see or touch. The white (to speak for myself), Western mind is proving to be more limited in creating meaning and good society than we like to think. As I already said – the worldview of Jesus' time could be seen as ignorant, pre-scientific. But I believe there's merit in asking ourselves what are we missing? There is much wisdom in what indigenous cultures have to offer.

But also, I want to say – look around. Where now do we see bondage, slavery, and suffering? Are we so sure we know what causes them? We may not believe in literal angels and demons controlling people, but I believe we are all caught up in a web of powers nonetheless. Whenever we interact with an organisation, an institution, an agency or company, we're dealing with things that have a surface dimension, but also a hidden personality that can sometimes only be described as 'angelic' or 'demonic' in terms of how it affects us.

An extreme example of this is a mob at a political rally or sports match – it may be made up of perfectly decent humans, but all together, inflamed by anger or alcohol, it becomes something that can best be named as evil, capable of great harm. Those of us who have spent any length of time dealing with WINZ will know that no matter how likeable a given staff member might be, the underlying culture of the place dehumanises and destroys people's dignity. And this is somehow more than the sum of its parts. I don't believe that a materialist viewpoint gives us an adequate explanation for this kind of emergent, collective energy that almost seems to have a life of its own.

All of this together makes up what Walter Wink calls the ‘Domination System’ – a total network of harmful economic practices, self-serving politics and all forms of discrimination.² It’s held in place by violence, and it touches into the daily life of everyone on the planet, forcing millions of people into poverty, despair and imprisonment. We see the effects of it in various kinds of physical and mental illness, and in the horrors of abuse and suicide. It is this system that Jesus came to redeem, and the people crushed by it that he still wants to heal, free and restore.

Today is the Sunday before Waitangi Day. While in this country many people like to pride ourselves on our race relations, I suggest that Waitangi Day should serve each year as a reminder that there are wounds in our collective body as a nation that have not been recognised and will not be healed until they are acknowledged. Simply put, Māori bear more of the brunt of the Domination System in our country than Pākehā. Until there is repentance, and active measures to heal the past, this will go on being the case.

In our gospel reading, we see Jesus healing the sick and the tormented – those who were not only troubled by disease, but also those whose suffering was caused or made worse by poverty or oppression. Christ’s compassion is always for those who suffer. And, we know that a process of restoration is underway, where not only are people healed, but the powers that control our lives are coming under God’s loving will. It’s hard to see, especially in very difficult seasons, but there is a slow arc of justice unfolding in the cosmos, towards a victory that is already achieved. We are called to join with God in this work of renewal.

Absolutely crucial to all this is the bit in today’s reading where Jesus gets up in the morning while it is still dark and goes out into a deserted place to pray. When we attempt to fix or heal our own pain, or the pain of others by only paying attention to what we can see and touch (organic systems within the body – which is what our medical system has focused exclusively on for too long) we only address ourselves to part of the problem. The dimension of suffering that’s caused by the effect of the domination system on us can only be touched by prayer – by the healing of the God who is victorious over the

² Walter Wink, a biblical scholar peace activist in Apartheid South Africa and in other hard places of the world, knows about this system first hand. His book ‘The Powers that Be’ is an excellent and important read.

powers. This is why we pray for healing even when we have excellent medicine. Please don't hear me say that all illness is caused by the powers, or that all illness can only be healed by prayer. Of course that's not the case, and I'm grateful for all the achievements of Western medicine. But I am saying that sometimes our suffering is made worse by, or has its origins in, our enslavement to the domination system.

Also, if we're going to offer ourselves into God's healing of the world we must also have our spirits refreshed and our minds transformed. In fact, if we are not in the habit of prayer, deeply connected with God in our own spirits, then we will come to be part of the problem. We are all enmeshed in the Domination System. Sometimes we are its victims, but sometimes we are its perpetrators. Sometimes the Domination System gets inside of us, and we act and choose according to what it tells us, rather than discerning a better way.

As the church of Christ, we want to offer an alternative - a place and a community where those who are weary and worn down can find rest and love. To build this community we must ourselves be renewed, and the only way that I know of that this can happen is through prayer. Not the kind of prayer where we tell God what we think and what ought to happen, but the kind of prayer where our inner bondage, and our blindness and illusions are dissolved by the action of God's Spirit.

As Lent approaches, I call each one of us to a renewed prayer, and to a renewed openness of heart to God's longing to heal the cosmos.