

Making Peace – San Jose de Apartado

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”. (Matthew, Chapter 5, Verse 9)

Peacemaking can sound easy and is often mistaken for simply not making war, or for talking about peace, without actually doing anything. Sadly peacemakers from Gandhi to Martin Luther King going all the way back to Jesus Christ himself and arguably even someone like John Lennon, have found themselves brutally murdered after speaking out for peace. They are famous examples. I want to tell you about a group of people who are not famous, but perhaps should be, for the brave and inspirational stance they have taken for the cause of peace in their country.

The Urabai Region of Colombia is a lush banana-growing area, which could almost be a paradise on earth, were it not for the fact that in its dark heart is some of the most fought over land in the whole of that troubled nation. It is unfortunate for the people who live there that the good soil, coupled with its strategic importance has made the area a battleground between the left-wing FARC guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries, allegedly augmented on occasions by members of the regular Colombian army.

The campesinos or peasant farmers in the region are left with a number of choices. They can leave. This could perhaps be seen as the ‘Pontius Pilate’ solution, but surely could be understood in the circumstances. They can accept one side as their protectors and so, however unwillingly, allow themselves to be involved in the conflict. Or they could do what the people of San Jose de Apartado have done for the last ten years; declare themselves to be a ‘*comunidad de paz*’ – a neutral community of peace. This they have decided to do. Why?

Gelita, a member of the community puts it like this: “the idea of forming a peace community, an unarmed community sounded really good to us. We liked the idea of not having weapons. We have machetes to work, but not to fight.” Anybody trying to enter the community with a gun is told to hand it in before they can come in. They refuse to help either side in the civil war. It would be reassuring to think that this stand against violence and murder would have brought the community the peace and justice they so deserve. The truth is far from this.

By taking this brave stand for peace they have been attacked by both sides. According to the report, *I Will Never be Silenced: Testimonies of hope from Colombian Women*, produced by the American Friends Service Committee and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, in the ten years since it was established in March 1997, with the support of the local bishop, “the community of less than 1 200 inhabitants has paid for their non-violent resistance with the lives of more than 165 men, women and children”. In one massacre in February 2005, one of the leaders of the community, Luis Eduardo was killed along with eight others, including his 18-month old son, who was then cut into pieces. After this particular outrage and charges that the Colombian army were involved, the US temporarily blocked a portion of its military aid to Colombia. This has now been resumed and it goes to Colombia along with military aid from the UK. It was heart-warming to read recently in *The Guardian* that about 200 delegates at the labour party conference in September had signed a petition calling for a cessation of this aid. Yet the UK remains the 2nd biggest provider of arms to the Colombian government.

Yet the community refuse to give up. They have recently produced a DVD about their community called '*Hasta la Ultima Piedra*' (Until the Last Stone). This documents life at the community and highlights their refusal to take sides in the conflict and their determination to live peacefully in a battleground and be an example to those around them and indeed the whole world. In one part of the DVD it shows how the local armed police said that they were going to build a police station in their village, to 'protect the villagers'. The members of the San Jose de Apartado Peace Community saw it differently and decided that in fact the police would be expected to be protected from guerrillas by the villagers, who would in effect be nothing more than human shields for the police. This was a time when they could merely have protested and given in. But protest, which is wholly negative has its limitations:

"Protest should not be merely the politics of complaint....it should instead show the way for both personal and social transformation. That's what excites people and invites them to give their lives for something larger than themselves. The power of protest is not in its anger, but its invitation. The test of protest is whether it points and opens the way to change or merely denounces what is. When protest is both instructive and constructive in a society, it becomes something that has to be dealt with and not just merely contained.

In fact those who protest should be making a promise. They are promising their society that a better way is indeed possible. They are saying that the bigotries, the injustices, the indignities, the indifferences and the unnecessary violence we suffer today, will not have the last word. Instead their protest reveals the things that can and must be changed for the good and health of the entire society and the world. We need people who pledge themselves, not just to object to what is wrong, but to help find and fashion an alternative. In other words the best protest is not merely countercultural, it is transformational. It gives society a better vision for itself and for the future. That is the way of the prophets. They began in judgement, but ended in hope for change. The biblical prophets were never just complaining; they were imagining a newer world." (Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*, p.46-7)

It strikes me that what the San Jose de Apartado Peace community did next fits in perfectly with the transformational protest, giving Colombian society and indeed the world a vision of something better. They left their old village behind, upped sticks and re-built their village up the valley away from the police station. They were determined to follow that prophetic notion of 'imagining a better world.' For their pains, not only did they have to re-build their village, but they were criticised by a number of figures, from President Uribe downwards, so effectively giving a green light for the right-wing paramilitaries to continue their murderous business. Yet how could the San Jose de Apartado Peace Community be in league with the FARC, when 23 members have been violently murdered by them in the last ten years?

The reason why the DVD is called (in English) *Until the Last Stone*, is because after every brutal murder, they paint a stone and put the names on of those murdered on it as part of their moving memorial. It is now a memorial; one which is sadly far too big. Yet the title of the DVD says it all; despite all the problems they will not give up. I believe it is because for all the fact that 10% of the community members have been murdered they have that longer biblical vision and understand what Jesus meant when he said that those 'who live by the sword shall die by it'. Any society worth living in has to be formed by peaceful means or any peace resulting from the end of a violent struggle will merely be a short interlude in the cycle of violence.

Aung San Suu Kiyu, the elected leader of Burma put it this way in an interview with *Index on Censorship* magazine in 1997, “Military coups, which have happened enough in Burma, are violent ways of changing situations and I do not want to encourage and perpetuate this tradition of bringing about change through violence. Because I’m afraid that if we achieve democracy in this way we will never be able to get rid of the idea that you bring about necessary changes through violence.”

Aung San Suu Kiyu is of course a Buddhist, but this still seems an excellent way of articulating Jesus’ command to Peter to ‘put down your sword’ into a modern context. Similarly, the brave beautiful actions of the San Jose de Apartado Peace Community seem to be an excellent way of making the biblical traditions of seeking peace and a better society a reality.

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