

Gloria Park

Dr. Galbreath

UR601

Book Analysis

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, renowned theologian and civil rights activist Howard Thurman offers a revolutionary re-interpretation of the religion of Jesus on behalf of those “with their backs constantly against the wall,” by which he means the “poor, the disinherited [and] the dispossessed,” and exhorts them to dismantle what he refers to as “the three hounds of hell”—namely fear, deceit, and hatred—by way of love (3, 19). The author begins by offering his groundbreaking interpretation of Jesus as “religious subject rather than religious object” (5). Thurman establishes that Jesus was born as a Jew, and a poor Jew at that, and hence a member of the marginalized within society at the time. The author asserts that all of the above factors combined to create a wider backdrop which directly shaped “the revolutionary character of some of [Jesus’] insights” (9). One by one, Thurman proceeds to lay out the aforesaid three hounds of hell, and juxtapose them with the revolutionary teachings of Jesus, essentially claiming that “The kingdom of God is within” (Lk. 17:21). First, Thurman defines fear as the threat of perpetual violence, whether physical or more often than not, mental and spiritual, in which “it is not the fear of death” in and of itself that is most threatening, but “the deep humiliation arising from dying without benefit of cause or purpose” (28). As a solution to this issue, the religion of Jesus grants the oppressed a sense of significance and self-esteem by reaffirming their identity as children of God, which in turn redefines the relationship of the oppressed to themselves and the oppressors. The second hound of hell, or deception, is defined as the loss of integrity and self-esteem, to which the solution offered by the religion of Jesus is “a complete and devastating

sincerity” (59). Furthermore, Thurman claims, “sincerity in human relations is equal to, and the same as, sincerity to God” (62). Last but not least, hatred appears the most illusive in terms of description, but is defined as “contact without fellowship,” which in turn leads to “unsympathetic understanding” and “the active functioning of ill will” (65-67). In other words, hatred is a sort of “great bitterness” which is enabled by “sustained resentment” (69). Once again, the religion of Jesus presents an alternative vision by calling us to love our enemies “that [we] may be children of our Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:45).

As aforementioned, the intended audience of this work is those with their proverbial “backs against the wall,” or who suffer from systemic injustices within society, including but not limited to “issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion, and national origin” (xix). In this sense, I believe the author is successful in reaching his intended audience, although the writing style is rather advanced and thus may be somewhat difficult to read for those without access to higher education. Regarding content, however, the author consistently writes from the perspective of the marginalized, illustrating that his interest in the question of the relevance and potency of Christianity for those with their backs against the wall is both “personal and professional” (ibid.). One strength of the book is this very fact, that is that the author himself understands very well what it means to be a member of the oppressed and simultaneously coalesces his own experience with his faith, proving that the two are indeed not contradictory, but rather at the very heart of the religion of Jesus. Given his personal experience as a Black man in the United States, particularly during the Civil Rights movement, the author is dissatisfied with an “other-worldly” interpretation of Christianity which has no bearing on the present and particularly, the marginalized (19). To portray such a Christianity which offers no present hope or comfort to the disenfranchised is to “betra[y them] into the hands of [their]

enemies by focusing [their] attention upon heaven, forgiveness, love, and the like” (ibid.). Instead, Thurman argues for presenting an interpretation of the religion of Jesus which “show[s] its strength and vitality rather than its weakness and failure” (ibid.). Another strength of the work is its solid biblical foundation, focused particularly on the Gospels and such epistles as Romans, underscoring one’s identity as a child of God first and foremost. This is unsurprising given that the author is a trained theologian and pastor, having graduated from Rochester Theological Seminary and established the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, the first interracial church in the nation. Too often, Christian authors present a theological work with insufficient biblical grounding or vice versa, biblical scholars focus so much on the biblical text without practical theological implications. In this work, Thurman masterfully integrates both. Lastly, one strength of the work is that it presents a clear thesis addressing the question of: “Is there any help to be found for the disinherited in the religion of Jesus?” (36). From start to finish, the author does not stray from his initial objective, which is to demonstrate the power of Christianity in overcoming the three hounds of hell, namely fear, deception, and hate, by way of love and “the kingdom...within” (24). One critique I have of the work is that I wish the author had incorporated more examples either based on his own experience or that of others in terms of the practical implications of living out this “inward center” in the modern day-to-day (11). The last chapter, namely Love, touches on this briefly, but provides more general suggestions as loving one’s enemies and viewing others as fellow children of God, namely sinners saved by grace.

One takeaway I received from the book was the kingdom of God which Thurman presents as one which is primarily concerned with that which is “inside” rather than a physical kingdom, or heaven, per se. While I had always been taught that the kingdom of heaven was more about a person than a place, I seldom thought about the implications of such when it came

to the issue of justice. For instance, Thurman repeatedly emphasizes that true liberation from social injustice does not come in the form of physical violence or even emancipation from the oppressor, but rather being grounded in one's identity as a child of God. Thanks to Thurman's work, I am now able to better understand and view Jesus' teaching and ministry as a counter-cultural revolution of sorts, rather than viewing such commands to love one's neighbor and enemies as blind to the social injustices of his day. Another takeaway which I received from *Jesus and the Disinherited* was the self-defeating nature of the hounds of hell to which the author refers, namely fear, deception, and hatred. While the author recognizes and understands the very real survival instincts amongst the oppressed, he argues that it is not so much the fear of death or violence itself of which one ought to be afraid, but rather the loss of one's soul in the process. The author maintains that whoever gives into fear, deception, or hatred ultimately becomes a byproduct of these very vices. In other words, Thurman argues that "out of the heart are the [real] issues of life and...no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them" (11). To put it another way, "[t]o revile because one has been reviled—this is the real evil because it is the evil of the soul itself" (11). Truly it is not "against flesh and blood" against which we are fighting, but the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12). Lastly, a final takeaway which I received from Thurman's work was the sociological implications of the gospel. In order to redeem one's sense of self-worth and belonging, one must first be reconciled unto God; the individual may then develop "a new courage, fearlessness, and power" which results from this identity as a child of God (39). It is within the context of this newfound identity as child of God that one is able to relate to one's brethren as similarly created in the image of God. Indeed,

within the kingdom of God, “[t]here is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

One way in which I intend to apply what I have learned from *Jesus and the Disinherited* is to intentionally diversify both my inner and outer circles, or “take the initiative in seeking ways by which [I] can have the experience of a common sharing of mutual worth and value” (90). This can manifest in a variety of ways, including but not limited to attending church services and collaborating worship services of churches of a different cultural and theological background than that of my own. Additionally, I can take advantage of the existing diverse student body within ATS by grabbing coffee or lunch with my classmates and engaging in conversation outside of the classroom, sharing one another’s personal lives and experiences. I am also prayerfully considering ways in which to slowly grow my church into an increasingly more multiethnic, interracial community, as well, whether by offering worship in other languages, and catering to our local demographics and needs. Another practical application from reading this work is taking advantage of the “experience of universality” which situations of great need present (93). I am currently a member of the Justice & Mercy ministry at my church, which seeks to bring hope and relief to those in need by raising awareness and providing support. As such, I hope to be more aware of local and global needs by regularly being in conversation with our neighbors as well as staying up-to-date with the news. On a larger scale, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic provides a tangible expression of the experience of universality to which Thurman refers. Thus, practical manners in which we can be one “human family” during this time of great need is to provide assistance for the most marginalized and vulnerable, as well as doing our due diligence in practicing safe protocol and precaution, as able (94). Last but not least, I am convicted of the need to love my enemies by forgiving them. Forgiveness is a

principle I have long wrestled with, beginning with my own family, but I realize that the longer I harbor resentment and hatred towards them, the more I am personally affected, which in turn affects my relationship with others, including my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Hence, I commit to actively seeking and giving forgiveness, so as to set myself and others around me free, and enter into the kingdom of God collectively.

Bibliography

Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.