

Romans 1.16-32 Targum (take two)

by Brian Walsh

Brothers and sisters, as we listen in on St. Paul addressing folks at the very heart of the Roman empire, I want to put my cards on the table this morning.

I want to tell you, that...

In the face of the collapse of the dominant worldview of the modern West,
I'm ashamed when consumerism and greed is embraced
in the name of a false Christian gospel of affluence.

In the face of the crisis of capitalism,
I'm ashamed when Christians embrace free enterprise as God's own
choice for an economy.

In the face of thousands dieing daily of malnutrition,
billions living in desperate poverty,
and the world on the precipice of irreparable ecological despoliation,
I'm ashamed that good Christian folks will appeal to "Romans one"
to legitimate homophobic gay and lesbian bashing.

These are, I submit, shameful gospels.
They leave me defeated, embarrassed and angry.

But I am *not* ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
This gospel is nothing less than the power of God for salvation.
A power that blows apart the empire,
dethroning its pretentious claims,
unveiling its lies for what they are.

Why am I not ashamed of this gospel?
Because through its power, life is put to rights.

Why am I not ashamed of the gospel?
Because in it we meet a justice achieved not through imperial violence,
but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ,
who bore such violence
on an imperial cross.

Why am I not ashamed of the gospel?
Because such shame will paralyze me,
render me unable to heed the call to faithfulness
and so disempower me that I will not have the energy to live for justice.

Righteousness, justice, faithfulness – all in the shadow of empire.
This is the fruit of the gospel

that we long to proclaim and engender
in this Wine Before Breakfast community.

So let's be clear about what is going on these days.

Let's not engage in cover up with talk of market corrections,
or market misbehaviour.

Let's not try to salvage this leaky ship of fools
with billions of dollars of tax payers' money.

No, my friends, that's way too cheap, and doesn't begin to address the problem.

What's going on in the present economic crisis
is nothing less than the wrath of God
being revealed against all ungodliness,
all injustice, all greed, all false gospels
and the distorted lives they produce.

But an empire of deceit,
an economy of lies,
is no surprise when we have become so adept
at suppressing the truth of God that is plain
from the very nature of creation.

What part of the finite and gift character of creation didn't they get
when they adopted an ideology of infinite greed,
insatiable consumption
and an ever expanding and ever growing economy?

Doesn't the very nature of creation
bear witness to a God of abundance rooted in justice?

Doesn't the very goodness of creation
bear witness to the generosity of this God?

Doesn't the very place of humanity in the order of things
teach us that are called to image the Creator
through loving and careful stewardship?

So here's the sad truth, my friends:
this empire of greed,
this narrative of economic growth,
this whole house of cards is based on lies and deception.

This whole culture of consumption,
this whole empire of money,
is based on self-willed ignorance.

Creation proclaims a better way
because creation bears witness to a God of grace.

But we have suppressed this truth,
engaged in denial and cover-up.

Refusing to live a life of gratitude,
 refusing to live a life of thanks to the God
 who called forth such a rich creation,
 refusing to honour this Creator God,
 and embracing a culture of entitlement and ingratitude,
 we abandoned the God of light and embraced the dark.

And in all of our complex theories
 in all of our sophisticated and incomprehensible economic talk,
 we became futile in our thinking
 we ended up with lots of talk but no sense,
 theories that are empty,
 vanity of vanities.

And we thought that we were so wise,
 we thought that we had it all figured out,
 but the joke has been on us,
 and it is now clear that we have been fools.

You see, that's what happens when you get in bed with idols.

That's what happens when you don't image God in faithful justice,
 but embrace graven images,
 cheap imitations,
 that look so good,
 look so powerful,
 but will always fail you,
 will always come up short
 because they are impotent.

Empty idols, empty minds.
 Dumb idols, lives of foolishness.
 Betrayal and disappointment.
 Fear and terror.

Embrace the idol of economism,
 believe its false promise of abundance,
 allow your lives to be shaped by the greed of this idol,
 and you will reap the bankruptcy of that false faith,
 you'll be "hooked on avarice"
 you'll be caught up in an "idolatry of ideology,"
 and your life will be reshaped in the image of that pitiful idol.

Embrace the idol of economism,
 believe its false promise of wealth and power,
 and you will find yourself facing "No Options."

You will find your life constricted and bound,

stuck in a moment that you can't get out of,
 and the economic freedom that you dreamed of will awaken to the reality
 of lost value,
 international terrorism
 and a despoiled planet.

And God says, "to hell with you."
 And God says, "make your bed and lie in it."
 And God says, "go ahead and screw your idols"
 And God says, "I'll let those idols screw you right back."

My friends, we are not facing an economic crisis.
 We are facing a spiritual crisis.
 The issue isn't fundamentally the markets.
 The issue is idolatry at the very root and foundation of our society,
 at the very root and foundation of our very way of life,
 at the very root and foundation of our very souls.

We are called to live in the truth,
 we are called to embody truth in our lives,
 but we have traded in the truth for a lie.

Our imaginations have been taken captive,
 we can hardly dream of what life outside the grip of idolatry
 would look like;
 we can scarcely imagine a life that isn't enslaved to consumption;
 we can't even begin to get our heads around justice and righteousness;
 generosity and contentment are alien to us,
 and an economics of enough is impossible to conceive,
 let alone live.

And it is all so empty,
 it is all so foolish,
 it is all so senseless.

We have got into bed with idols,
 and not known the Lord.
 We have bent the knee to idolatry
 and not worshipped the Creator
 who is blessed forever. (Amen.)

Having embraced an insatiable idolatry of greed,
 having been taken captive by an idolatry of consumption,
 our desires are perverted,
 our passions run wild,
 and we are lost in a sexual fantasy land that is deathly.

Our young women package themselves as sexual products,

ready for consumption.
 Our young men notch up their sexual conquests,
 egocentric proof of their prowess.
 Our sexuality is divorced from covenantal intimacy
 and reduced to cheap carnal entertainment.
 But this is not why God created us as sexual beings.
 All of this is a betrayal of who we are called to be.
 The image of God is perverted by such sexual idolatry.

And remember, idols are insatiable.
 They always require sacrifice and they are never satisfied.
 And they have a terrible appetite for children.
 There is no idolatry apart from child sacrifice.
 This is the devastating truth of our culture.

Just as the economy will require the sacrifice of all of creation
 to fuel its ever-expanding growth,
 so will an insatiable sexual idolatry require the sexual sacrifice of children.

This is a predatory culture,
 and children are the most vulnerable victims.
 This is the bitter fruit of idolatry.
 This is the sexuality of empire.

So it is no surprise that the God who gives us up to insatiable lust,
 and who gives us up to perverted desire,
 also gives us up to a debased vision of life,
 a mind of debauchery.
 That's what happens when you refuse to know God
 because you are too busy screwing with idols!

But make no mistake!
 Such idolatrous copulation bears the bad fruit
 of a deeply distorted life,
 full of evil longing,
 greed, hatred,
 envy, death,
 breaking community and destroying families,
 arrogance, insolent disrespect,
 foolishness, infidelity,
 and a ruthlessness that is borne of a heart
 that has turned its back on love.

All of this ...

this imagination,
this worldview,
this cultural practice,
this way of life,
... all of this is in service of a culture of death.

So don't be surprised if this culture dies,
and don't be surprised that this way of life will kill you,
even as you applaud and cheer everyone who lives this way.

And let's be clear.
I'm not talking about "them"
somehow in contrast to "us."
No my friends, we're in this shit together.
I'm talking about me.
I'm talking about you.