

SLOUCHING TOWARD BETHLEHEM

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In this season of our discontent, as we slouch toward another dread November, reliable prophets are few and far between. Perhaps a poet might do then, for the clangor of soul-numbing campaign ads surely brings to mind W.B. Yeats' timeless poem, *The Second Coming*:

"...The center cannot hold;
mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...
...the best lack all conviction,
while the worst are full of passionate intensity..."

Are we doomed, one wonders, to re-enact, again and again, Adam Smith's dire depiction of our Government and Laws?

"...Laws and Government may be considered in this case and indeed in every case as a combination [contraption] of the rich to oppress the poor, and preserve to themselves in inequality the goods which would otherwise be soon destroyed by the attacks of the poor..." (*Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 1751)

Our species' nearest kin, *Pan troglodytes* (Chimpanzee) and *Pan paniscus* (Bonobo), share 98.5 percent of our DNA. As condescending as we have been to these kissin' cousins, and as reluctant as we remain to concede the relevance of their experience to our own exalted life, perhaps the way they handle conflict could shed some light on our current predicament.

Chimpanzee social life is marred by ceaseless conflict and rude aggression, instigated mostly by younger males. While the ultimate target may be the reigning alpha male, the most conspicuous victims are, invariably, females young and old and their immature progeny. The powerless, the poor. A complex and fluid system of war coalitions, alliances and personal ties barely suffices to make this harsh arrangement half-way workable. And the carcasses of innocent victims bear testimony to the fragility of the social contract.

While Adam Smith, founding prophet of free-market Capitalism, was not a Hobbesian (*Homo hominem lupus est*, 'A man is like a wolf to his fellow man'), his vision of the more repressive aspects of our social institutions was tinged with the violence of a zero-sum game:

"...[the poor] who if not hindered by the government would soon reduce the others to equality with themselves. The government and laws hinder the poor from ever acquiring the wealth by violence which they would otherwise exert on the rich..." (*Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 1751).

Smith took it for granted that aggression will be there, and that it must be countered with state-sanctioned brute force. That is, the Chimp social model.

Bonobos, in contrast, handle conflict by unmitigated love and unbridled sex. Share and share alike, male or female, forever hugging and kissing and--perish the thought--copulating. Now here is the rub: compared to Chimps, the Bonobo social order is a harmonious lovefest, a win-win game. So much so that one wonders--have they per chance been listening to Bobby Dylan: "love is all there is, it makes the world go round"?

Our kin the Bonobos seem to know something that we, true vulture capitalists that we are, have apparently forgotten: that we *are* all our brothers' keepers. This in spite of repeated exhortations from our last reliable prophet, who is reputed to have said:

"...This is my commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you... No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends..." (John, 15:12-13).

When I asked my scriptural adviser, a renowned Jesuit scholar in Rome, whether all species of love were equally redeeming, whether they all shared a common thread--say, granting your fellow human the status of kindred spirit, just as deserving of love and compassion as yourself--I was fended off with this observation: John, thus Jesus, did not *really* speak of 'love' in our coarse, mundane, flesh-tainted sense. Rather, what He meant by the Greek *agapein* was 'loyalty', the commitment that comes from *pacting* with each other and keeping our oath. What is more, our love for each other is only akin to our love for the Divine if it remains untainted by the flesh, if it is part of our pact with the Divine. Has my adviser, I wondered, ever watched a pigeon mourn its lost mate, or a mare grieve for her dead foal? Has he ever basked in the unconditional love of a dog?

What of the Bonobos then, who seem so blithely ignorant of the Divine and yet are such experts at love and its conflict-resolution magic? True, they cannot tell us beans about their love; but they hug and kiss and caress and gaze *as if* they knew all about it. And they tend to their sick, raise their downcast and comfort their grieving. Sure, what they have in mind is often--shades of the Original Sin--unredeemed raw sex. But don't we know, from long histories and to our everlasting delight, how sex may engender love? And didn't *our* Old Testament observe:

"...And Adam said: This one is a bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh, she will be called she-man, for she was fashioned from a man; and for this a man would leave his father and mother and cleave to his woman and they shall become one flesh..." (Genesis, 2:22-24)

In this season of our disaffection, as the contending armies clash in the night and the Second Coming draws ever more remote, shouldn't we concede that the Bonobos' gospel--do unto others as ye shall have them do unto you--is not all that removed from Christ's? As we deal with our enemies resolutely and effectively, perhaps we should remember that hate is a sword that rebounds upon its wielder. And that our fellow citizen, however profoundly he/she may disagree with us on policy and politics, is still flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood.