

# The Kingdom of God is within you

Rondebosch United Church

2 December 2018, first Sunday in Advent and commemorating World AIDS Day

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## **Luke 17: 20-21**

*20 Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, 21 nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in within you.*

## **The intimate relationship between humans and microbes**

We humans have a long and intimate relationship with microbes such as bacteria and viruses. In fact, it is thanks to an enterprising bacterium that inserted itself in an early protocell about a billion years ago that we are here today. That bacterium allowed cells to start storing energy, which in turn allowed them to divide their labour and become differentiated – leading to the development of complex organisms. The vestiges of that bacterium is still found in each of our human cells today, in the form of mitochondria, the ‘power packs’ that release the energy of life. We continue to live in a symbiotic relationship with billions of bacteria. For example, about 70% of the neurotransmitter serotonin and half our dopamine is produced by in the ‘microbiome’ in our gut.<sup>1</sup>

We have a similar relationship with viruses. The human genome is an eclectic scavenger of genetic material from other organisms, and we have four times as much specifically viral DNA as uniquely human nucleic acid<sup>2</sup>

These facts remind us that we are just one species, fully interacting with the rest of nature. We are the product of 1 billion years of evolution that has resulted in this amazingly complex organism we call human. But we are also different from any other species that has gone before, in that we have developed a higher consciousness that allows us to appreciate the universe, question our role in it, and wonder how we are linked to its creation. Unlike any other organism, *homo sapiens* has the imagination, free will and the ability to co-create our own future and that of the world around us.

Because we exist in a moment in time, it is very easy to think that we have reached the pinnacle of development; that we are static beings created in the image of an unchanging God. But we have only been around for 1 thousandth of one percent of the duration of the universe. Like every other species, we are still evolving. Further, the emergent science of epigenetics has discovered that our environment – our family and community life and socio-economic

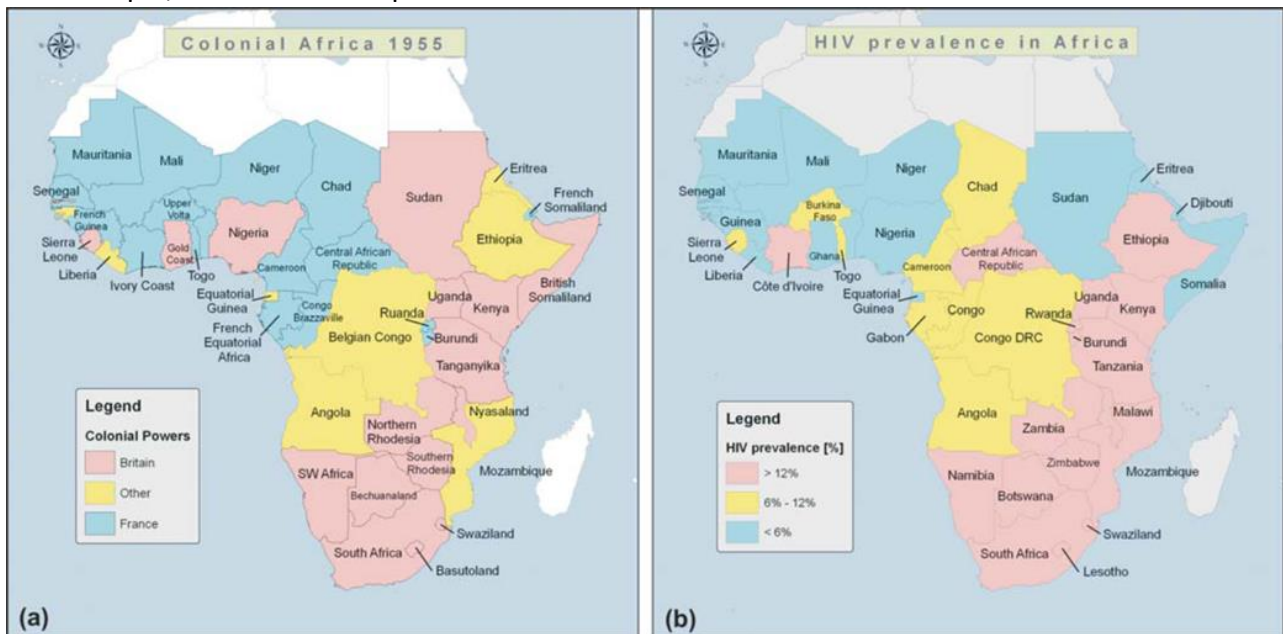
circumstances can actually alter our genes, priming us for survival in tough environments or to thrive in nurturing ones. Children who grow up in stressed circumstances become genetically primed for toughness at the expense of their ability to learn and socialize. How we think, how we act, how we nurture our children has the potential to become increasingly embedded in our very DNA.<sup>3</sup>

## HIV

The HIV epidemic is a sober reminder that viruses still have the passwords to our genetic codes. The retrovirus actually embeds itself in human DNA and uses our genetic material to replicate itself.

An epidemic is a massive explosion of infection at a rate far higher than the general prevalence in populations. We are now seeing signs that the HIV epidemic in South Africa is starting to burn itself out. The rate of new infection has more than halved over the past decade, but is starting to plateau at levels that are still far too high. It is described as a 'hyper-endemic state' – the 'new normal' in the South African population with about one in a hundred adults newly infected each year. That might not sound very high, but it means that a young person has a 20% chance of becoming infected with HIV over the next twenty years. We cannot accept the 'new normal' which continues to cause so much damage and heartache, and which is unlikely to go down much further without specific intervention on our part.

That means we really have to understand the dynamics of HIV infection; the factors that continue to drive it. One of the most important insights is that patterns of HIV are spatially distributed. In other words, HIV is concentrated in specific parts of the world, of this continent, in this country. For example, consider the map below.



On the left, you will see the countries of Africa colour-coded in terms of their former colonial masters. The pink shading represents former British colonies, the blue French and the yellow colour represents other colonial powers like Portugal and Belgium. The map on the right shows the distribution of HIV by level of infection, with the highest prevalence countries shaded pink, and the lowest blue. The similarities are striking. They suggest that specific features of British colonialism predisposed to HIV infection. We know some of them. Certainly, the migrant labour system associated with Britain's extractive mining activities was a major disruptor of family life, a pattern that has shaped South African society.<sup>4</sup>

In informal settlements, the prevalence of HIV infection is twice as high as in other residential spaces. These spatial patterns are similar to other forms of risk-taking – tobacco smoking, binge-drinking, poor diet, and the distribution of crime and violence. To be sure, we all take risks: some of us drink too much, smoke tobacco, ride a bicycle through heavy traffic, or even drown their vehicles in crocodile-infested rivers! (Ok, that was me). Taken together, we form a distribution of risk-tolerance: some more likely to take risk and others less so. But in informal settlements, the entire risk distribution is shifted towards higher risk. Certainly, the risk profile overlaps with that of all the people in, for example, this church today, and individuals may choose to move down the risk profile, but the overall profile is towards higher risk.

Which raises the question: why? What is it about life in informal settlements that predisposes to risk-taking? To my rather literal way of thinking, it suggests that there must be a psychological trigger for risk taking – a specific moment when a young woman from a shack-land decides, at least subliminally, that the risk of HIV is worth taking.<sup>5</sup> Some of the factors she may weigh up include the risk of physical violence if she gives up the protection of her older boyfriend; the risk of hunger when that man is her only source of income; the fear of loneliness where, with little prospect of employment, personal affirmation may be found most meaningfully in motherhood<sup>6</sup>.

To keep this discussion brief and focused, I won't fully flesh out the sociological and psychological pathways to risk taking. It has to do with a lack of personal choice and feeling of exclusion, and the way that people perceive future health benefits<sup>a</sup>. But let me jump straight to the heart of the matter: people seem more willing to put their future health at risk when they lack a sense of real and imminent possibility in life. What counts is not whether things will be brighter in five years' time, or indeed, in the after-life, but whether they feel that tomorrow might be a bit better than today.

Hope is the means to redistributing human virtue – without it, the mundane vices of humanity are concentrated in the lives of the poor, who are then punished for their hopelessness. Distributing hope – in the form of real and imminent possibility - is the means to social justice.

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<sup>a</sup> Please feel free to contact me ([david@dgmt.co.za](mailto:david@dgmt.co.za)) for a fuller explanation on the psychology of risk perception and risk-taking,

## **Advent**

Today (2 December 2018) is the first Sunday in Advent, and we have lit a candle that symbolises hope. Which begs the question: what is the hope behind the Hope Candle of Advent?

Through tradition, it has come to mean hope in the incarnation of Christ; Christ becoming human, becoming one of us. But even though we say that Christ is fully human, we tend to think of Him as a hybrid – part God, part human; rather like a Marvel comic superman – a person with supernatural powers. I don't think we can have it both ways. It clashes seriously with the gift of reason that is also part of us. If Christ became fully human, he can only be divine to the extent that each and every one of us is connected to God, and to the extent that God is within us.

The power to shape our humanity, to co-create our future, to effect peace on Earth rests in us. In the Gospel of Luke, Ch. 17: 20-21, the writer describes a group of Pharisees engaging Jesus. They wanted to know when the Kingdom of God would be coming; when there would be true liberation from political and social oppression. Jesus replied that the kingdom of God was not something that would be observed; people would not be able to point it out because the "kingdom of God is in within you." (Some translations say "the kingdom of God is within your midst, or among you). The implication of Christ's words was that power in the kingdom of God is distributed, not concentrated in the hands of a single liberator. This was indeed a radical shift in thinking.

Which begs the question of how that power is given effect, in human terms. Recent cognitive science has found that we as humans are generally wired for goodness. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio thinks that this probably reflects the evolutionary basis of our social emotions - disgust and indignation on one hand, and compassion, awe and elevation on the other.<sup>7</sup> However, this instinct is not uncontested. In the deep recesses of the brain, prosocial emotions like compassion contend with antisocial ones like pride and greed that can overwhelm individuals and societies if we don't nurture our instinct for goodness.

We have been around as a species for just over 100,000 years. Over that time we have developed a higher consciousness to appreciate our universe, imagine a better world and act on it. Our mission over the next ten years, hundred years, thousands years, is to evolve into a species that is more and more human – where humanness is defined by love and kindness – and where people are motivated by a sense of real and imminent possibility in life.

Now it may seem like I am selling secular humanism, just packaged in a Christmas wrapper. Humanism is the belief that incremental knowledge and problem-solving are the means to progress and development. At the same time, humanists often also strive for a more empathetic and inclusive society.

My first response is that we must team up with secular humanists, who share so much of our understanding of an ideal society at a time when the politics of division and hatred is gaining hold

globally. It does not make sense that what keeps us apart is disagreement over the belief in the existence of God, when neither side can prove it one way or the other, and where there is so much that unites us. I know the suggestion of teaming up will sit uncomfortably with some of the more strident secular humanists, who pride themselves in the purity of science. Nevertheless, we should reach out. The future of humanity – at least in the next few decades – depends on a strong and united voice for reason, peace and inclusiveness.

But I also think we need to look at ourselves as followers of Christ. Is it not time that we clearly defined our faith as an open space of respectful trust in what we know and what we still don't know – rather than a set of beliefs and doctrines that seem more and more implausible as science unfolds. This is not to say that we should not hold beliefs, but we should be willing to change our beliefs as we learn more and more. We have been given the gift of learning and reason, and must be open to an unfolding understanding of life and of ourselves. The alternative is to become more defensive and dogmatic – pushed into a small corner – when we should be embracing new knowledge of the origins of the universe and our connectedness to it.

The apostle Paul said: Now I see through the glass darkly, but in time I shall know fully, just as I am fully known (1 Cor. 13.12). Paul was writing before the Renaissance, before the Reformation, before the age of Enlightenment. Never before have we known as much as we now. The glass is becoming clearer, and we should not pretend that it is just as dark as ever. The new knowledge of our universe and our own minds is something we should embrace and of which we should be part.

There is a concept that many secular humanists find difficult to embrace, and that is the concept of love. They happily speak of 'sympathy' as a critical attribute for human progress, but many struggle to speak of love. Maybe it's because love is difficult to define, and its origins are not yet fully understood. Followers of Christ speak easily of love. "God is love... Where there is love, there is God. (1 John 4:8).

Does this mean Love is God? Are the two merely different representations of the same idea – mirror images of a powerful currency for human interaction and peace? I don't know. But where love teams up with hope – in the form of real and imminent possibility in life - it drives humanity towards the goal of universal goodness. Amen.

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- <sup>1</sup> Mayer, E. (2016). *The Mind-Gut Connection: How the Hidden Conversation Within Our Bodies Impacts Our Mood, Our Choices, and Our Overall Health*. New York: HarperCollins
- <sup>2</sup> Kean S (2012). *The Violinist's Thumb and other Lost Tales of Love, War and Genius, as written by our Genetic Code*. New York: Little, Brown & Company
- <sup>3</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2010). Early experiences can alter gene expression and affect long-term development. Working Paper 10, Center on the Developing Child. Harvard University. <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Early-Experiences-Can-Alter-Gene-Expression-and-Affect-Long-Term-Development.pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> Hargrove J (2008). Migration, mines and mores: the HIV epidemic in southern Africa. *South African Journal of Science* 104: 53 -61
- <sup>5</sup> Adams, J. (1995). *Risk*. London: University College of London Press.
- <sup>6</sup> LeClerc-Madlala S (2008). Intergenerational/ age-disparate sex and young women's vulnerability in Southern Africa. Presentation at the Technical Meeting on young women in HIV hyper-endemic countries of southern Africa. Muldersdrift, 18-19 June 2008. [http://www.hsrc.ac.za/research/output/outputDocuments/5427\\_Leclerc-Madlala\\_Intergenerationalagedisparatesex.pdf](http://www.hsrc.ac.za/research/output/outputDocuments/5427_Leclerc-Madlala_Intergenerationalagedisparatesex.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> Damasio, A. R. (2005). The neurobiological grounding of human values. In J. P. Changeux, A. R. Damasio, W. Singer, & Y. Christen (Eds.), *Neurobiology of human values* (pp. 47–56). London: Springer Verlag.