

Sunday 27th June 2021

2 Samuel 1:17-26 'Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon the high places'.

Why do we bother, do you think, with the Old Testament?

It's not always obvious why. Some of it is appalling. Much of it is confusing. All those kings and battles and dates, and laws about clothing and farming and sacrifices. Isn't the New Testament so much better? So much clearer, so much more obviously about the God of Love? Why don't we just focus on that?

It is a massive question, and a question which the Church has come back to again and again ever since a man called Marcion first asked it in the second century. Few of our modern questions, you see, are really *that* modern. As the Old Testament says somewhere, there's nothing new under the sun. It's an old, but massive, question and this morning I don't propose to say *everything* that could and should be said in response. But here are just a few thoughts.

First of all, it is one heck of a story – at least, certain books, certain passages. This morning's is one of them: telling of the death of Israel's first King, and his son Jonathan. So much hope had ridden on those two, so much early promise. They were the flower of Israel, filled with life and courage and vigour. And yet, as the books of Samuel tell us, Saul in particular was plagued by depression, rage, paranoia – and driven by his demons, what should have been magnificent was turned to dust. And here it ends, on the mountains of Gilboa, in defeat. How are the mighty fallen! Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon the high places. Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in Ashkelon, or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.

The Song of the Bow, as it is called, David's lament for Saul and Jonathan deserves to be remembered. Deserves to be read, even if it wasn't part of the Bible, just because of its beauty, its sadness, its grandeur. And there's so much else in the Old Testament like that. The Eden story. Cain and Abel. Joseph. The burning bush, the exodus, Ruth amid the alien corn, Jonah and the whale, Daniel and the lions.... The list goes on of, of deep and beautiful and powerful stories. We read the Old Testament because if we didn't our hearts and minds and imaginations would be much the poorer.

Not a good enough reason of course, not enough to call it Holy Scripture. Just, perhaps, great literature. But then of course, there's the further reason that these are the stories, these are the books, that Jesus soaked himself in.

Everything about him comes from here. If you want to know what he meant by God, by kingdom, by Messiah, by service; by bread, by vine, by anything – you find it here. There is no Jesus for us without the Bible he read. You just can't begin to make sense of him. So we read the Old Testament, not just because it is powerful and beautiful, but because we want to know Jesus.

And the more you read the Old Testament looking to know Jesus, the more you begin to realise that it's not *just* a matter of seeing how his teaching picks up on or is shaped by what went before. Important as that is, something deeper and stranger is going on too. And this morning's passage is actually a very good example of it. Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places. Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places. Think of those lines, and think of Jesus. Hailed, remember, by Simeon in the Temple at Candlemas as the glory of Israel. *To be a light unto the nations, and the glory of thy people Israel.* Slain, too, upon the high places.

And this is not just a superficial, verbal parallel: it goes deeper. Was Jesus not, after all, thought Christians, the true King of Israel? Yes, Saul and David and the rest of them had held that title and played that role, but had not all of them in a sense been place-holders, paving the way, pointing beyond themselves to the One who really would bring justice and peace, the one who really would fulfil all the hopes of the people, the one who would go into battle with their enemies and win decisively and forever? And that, thought Christians, is what Jesus had done. That's what the Cross was: the final contest with all Israel's enemies, not the Philistines this time, but that for which the Philistines had always been tokens – the darker powers of fear and violence and hate. Like Saul, Jesus goes into battle with them, and like him he is slain upon the high places.... But what the Saul story could not do of itself, the mystery it could not yet see, is that it is precisely in that slaying that victory comes. *Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon the high places.* For 2 Samuel the tone is simple lament, grief, admission of defeat. The slaying ends the glory. For the Gospel, the slaying begins it. It *makes* the glory. The kingship begins from the death on that hillside. All that Israel hoped for, all that failed come true in Saul, all that had been ruined and lost, in Jesus begun again, made new, made forever.

We read the Old Testament because it is beautiful and powerful; because we can't understand Jesus without it, and because we find Jesus in it: the light unto the nations, and the glory of his people Israel. Slain upon the high places, all glory be to him forever and ever. Amen.