

Enemies of God

Romans 5:1-11; Matt. 5:38-end.

One of the people at Tuesday night's session thinking about these readings and today's sermon said that right now, what people needed was an upbeat sermon. One about love and joy and hope.

I'm afraid that – at least to start with – this is not that sermon. Sorry, Bill.

But let's begin in a happy place: the boom in the number of people attending Morning Prayer. Morning Prayer has always happened every weekday in church, and until lockdown, it was nearly always only me plus one, maybe two others. Since lockdown, online, suddenly, it's ten or eleven people daily. That's an increase of several hundred percent. That kind of thing makes vicars happy.

However, there is a complication. At Morning Prayer, you read bits of the Bible that never get read on a Sunday. And the reason they're not read is that, often, they're appalling.

Take, for instance, the book of Joshua. Joshua is all about what happens after Moses and the Exodus. The people of Israel cross into the Promised Land and take it over. Now, said Land wasn't *empty*. It was already full of people. So what happens to them when the chosen people arrive? Chapters like Joshua 8 tell us. It's all about the assault on a city called Ai, and it ends like this:

“When Israel had finished slaughtering all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they had pursued them, and when all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to the city, and attacked it with the edge of the sword. The total of those who fell that day was twelve thousand, all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he had stretched out the sword, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. Only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as their booty, according to the word of the Lord that he had issued to Joshua.”

According to the word of the Lord which he had issued to Joshua. That's the kicker. The Bible says – repeatedly and clearly - that God ordered the murder of the people whose land was then to be stolen. That was the reading for Morning Prayer on Wednesday, and there's been many more like it. And some of you, understandably, have been giving me grief about it.

So.... how to deal with such stories?

Well, first of all, and most straightforwardly: don't believe them. They're not true.

Oh, there were indeed massacres. And Joshua and his crew may well have *believed* that they were divinely ordered. But Joshua was wrong. We *know* he was wrong. Remember, the supreme guide to the character of God is Jesus of Nazareth, God-made-flesh. If you cannot imagine Jesus doing something, you should not imagine God doing it – and can you imagine Jesus massacring men, women, and children? The same Jesus whom we have just heard saying *love your enemies*? If you can, you have greater intellectual dexterity than me.

No: Joshua is wrong. Which raises the question, of course, as to why we read it at all. Indeed, why bother with huge swathes of the Old Testament? I know many of you ask just that question. And there are many answers, but for the moment just try this one.

Think of your sixteen year-old self. I hope you can do that with some degree of charity and affection. You might well wish you could be sixteen again. But there are also probably aspects of it that are not so great. When I was sixteen, brothers and sisters, I confess to you that ... I bought records by Tiffany. I supported Chelsea. I thought Tony Benn was the best Prime Minister we never had. And more seriously, like most of us, I thought, said and did some very crass things. Things which seemed reasonable at the time, but which if I could go back the wiser, maturer, *better* me would certainly not do again.

However if I am wiser, maturer, better it's only because I did all that first. You only grow through your mistakes and disasters – even, if handled right, your sins. Our past, in all its ambiguity, makes us. Even the things we think we've travelled furthest from still shape how we're travelling. I'm now very, very glad Tony Benn was never Prime Minister – but I still have his books. He's still shaped the way I think and the kind of things I think are important, even if I've now come to very different conclusions about most of them.

And so it is with the people of God. The Book of Joshua is like the sixteen year old version of our collective self. We read it and think, 'how *could* we have thought that? how could we have acted like that?' And it is indeed *we*: the one people of God. Joshua is our adolescent crassness, the disaster we can hardly bear to look at now. But look at it we should. We grew from that disaster and only through remembering it do we truly understand ourselves now.

And it serves us also as a grim reminder: the people of God are always capable of getting things spectacularly, terribly wrong. Our ancestors really believed they were doing God's will in those massacres. What are we doing now that one day our children will look at in horror?

What's more, remember this. Sometimes, your sixteen year-old self was right - or at least not wholly wrong. Sometimes, age does not bring wisdom but the hardening of the heart. I remember the first time I ever encountered a homeless person begging on the street. I was eighteen. And I remember the sheer sense of rage I felt, that a civilised, prosperous country could *let* this happen, that it could last for more than five minutes, that ending it was not *the* single over-riding priority of state and society. Now, the more mature me recognises that street homelessness is complicated and not easily soluble; but I also know that that rage was righteous, and that it has subsided, and that insofar as I have become complacent and comfortable my teenage self sits rightly in judgement on me.

And so it is, perhaps, with the adolescent book of Joshua. Could there be something which it gets right and we get wrong? Indeed so. Modern believers like to think of God as very amiable and tolerant. He's nice. He's sympathetic. He will understand and ultimately forgive everything. No-one really has to *fear* God. No-one is really his enemy; no-one will really be subject to his wrath. We don't like such language; we don't like such ideas. We sometimes say, crudely, almost anti-Semiticly, that that is the God of the Old Testament, not the New, and that we are better off without him.

Which only shows two things. Number one, and most obviously, we haven't read much of the New Testament. The God of the Book of Revelation, or the Letter to the Hebrews, or of Paul, or indeed of Jesus is *not* an especially comfortable God. He has all sorts of very, very stern things to say and threatens his enemies with terrible judgement. And number two, we have lost the sense that it is actually *possible* to be an enemy of God: that there are ways of living which in the end mean you must perish. Which, if you do not change, mean that you will not be in the Promised Land. That is not a sixteen year-old folly. Would that more of us believed it and took it into account before we passed by the beggars in the street. Before we paid rubbish wages. Before we committed adultery and abandoned our families. On all these things the wrath of God is coming.

Both testaments, Old and New, are at one on this. The enemies of God have it coming. But the New then deepens that thought in two very striking ways:

Number one: As Paul puts it in our reading from Romans 5 - 'while we were enemies.' We were enemies. It's not, like it was in Joshua, the people of God versus the rest of the wicked world. The enmity to God runs in everyone. Paul knew that he himself had taken part in the murder of Stephen. We know, if we are honest, the ways in which we have been God's enemies. God in the beggar passed by. God in the child neglected. God in the partner betrayed. The world is not divided into the children of light and children of darkness. If you are looking for the enemies of God, the New Testament says, look in the mirror.

And number two: how does God deal with enemies? Joshua knows one way only: kill them. The New Testament says something else. The enemy indeed deserves to die. But, as Paul says, 'God proves his love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' Or as Jesus said, Love your enemies – and then He did so on the Cross. He loved his enemies: taking on Himself all that should have been theirs – all the horror, all the dread, everything it means to be in enmity with God. He takes it on Himself so that no-one else must. This is what our mysterious language about him descending into Hell means. He goes where his enemies are. Whatever depths of hostility and pain and rejection of God we have put ourselves into, He goes there. He goes there to put his arms around us, and bring us back. No-one has to stay an enemy now. No-one has to die. God proves His love for us. And that love is bigger, stronger, deeper than the very worst of our enmity. It can bring even the worst of the enemies home.

God proves his love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. To him be all the praise and glory, now and forever.