

Violence in Bible and Tradition

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Philippians 3:4b-11

John 3:16-21

Over the last four weeks I have been laying out four touchstones for the Gospel of Christ as a Gospel of Peace. I started by saying that the foundation of our knowledge of the goodness and love of God is Jesus. “God is Christlike in whom there is no unChristlikeness at all” (Bishop Michael Ramsey). I then went on to say how the life, death and resurrection of Christ reveals not only how God is *making* the world through love but is also *saving* us, through love, from our entrapment in mimetic (imitative) desire, competition, violence and scapegoating. Through the Spirit we are being grafted onto the death and resurrection of Christ and being made into human beings, gifted with a new mind and the fruits of the Spirit. Becoming a human being means our lives are taking on a cruciform shape.

At the end of last week I then asked the question – if the gospel is about cruciform love, then what do we do with appalling violence we find in the Bible, from God appearing to order genocide through to the suggestion that God burns people in hell for not doing or believing the right things. I said that we would need to think about *how* we, as Christians read the Bible.

Obviously this is a huge topic so I just want to offer a few thoughts on how we might navigate some of these questions about violence in the Bible.

What we are doing here is coming full circle and returning to Touchstone 1 – that is, that we primarily know God as Christlike. Jesus is the primary Word (that is, revelation) of God.

Saying that the bible is the ‘word of God’ is accurate to the extent that the biblical text is *pointing to and revealing the Christlike God*. In reading our scriptures, we need to be listening for Christ in, through and behind the words of the text.

This foundational principle, that Jesus is the Word of God, even shaped the way the Bible was being written. The gospels all begin by saying that they are a testimony to an existing apostolic witness to Jesus, the Lord. St Paul is doing the same thing in his letters. Through his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Rd, Paul realised that the way he had been reading his Bible (the Hebrew Scriptures) to justify violence against Christ himself was completely wrong. In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul spoke of how the scripture had previously been ‘veiled’ for him. That is, the true meaning of the scripture had been hidden. He says,

‘when one turns to the LORD (that is, Christ), the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with *unveiled* faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are *being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another*; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:16-18).

Looking at the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is *transforming* us into human beings, made in Christ’s image.

Because of this, the church did not read the Bible at face value – what we might call a ‘plain reading’ as if the meaning of the text was self-evident. Rather, they looked to discern how the scriptures were anticipating and revealing the pattern of Christ’s life who they had now encountered as Lord

through oral testimony, preaching and prayer....and as they had been taught to read it by Jesus himself (Luke 24:13-35; John 5:39).

A common approach to doing this was to read *allegorically*. For example, the texts of terror in which God apparently orders the invitation of the promised land including the slaughter of women, children and animals simply could not be squared with Jesus's command to love enemies, and how Jesus died for sinners as well as the righteous. Therefore one way that they read the invasion of the promised land was as an allegory (a kind of symbolic representation) of God's defeat of the enemy within – that is, God driving out the forces within which oppress us. Paul takes an allegorical approach when he talks about Adam as the 'type' (a kind of prototype) of the true human who was to come (that is, Christ) (Romans 5:14)

Whenever a community is using self-justifying violence to secure itself, we can see the pattern of the scapegoating which led to Jesus being crucified. In this way we can see that the text of the scripture is *revealing* the human problem of violence along with God's solution – which is the humble self emptying of Jesus. When Archen (Joshua 7:25-26) is stoned to death for hiding some of the loot of the enemy; or when Phineas (Numbers 25:6-9) runs his sword through an Israelite who is having a prohibited relationship with a foreign woman, God is said to endorse these murders, we can recognise our own self-justifying violent myths.

When we read the Bible in this way, we can see that violence in the Bible is part of God's revelation. But it's the revelation of *our* violence, not the violence of God. So, we shouldn't try to expunge these texts or stop reading them. Because violent texts teach us about ourselves. We should not, as the lectionary often does, fail to read the last line of Psalm 137 where the Psalmist says, "Happy is he who takes your infants and dashes them against the rocks". The Bible is meant to shockingly confront us with ourselves.

Reading the text through the lens of Christ's nonviolence also helps us when it comes to understanding what is going on with the language of wrath, judgement and hell. When we approach these themes, we need to *begin* by allowing us to craft our understanding of judgement.

The language of judgement and wrath tends to conjure up an image of God as a judge sitting on a high bench and dishing out punishments. But how do we get from Christ to that kind of image? The early church spoke of God using metaphor to express aspects of Christlikeness. This enabled the church to locate concepts of judgement in a context of the one who judges. For example:

Firstly....the image of God as a **physician**. Salvation comes from the word 'to heal' (as in the antiseptic cream – called 'Savlon' – the 'salve'). When I go to a doctor, he/she may make a 'judgement' about some unhealthy aspect of my lifestyle. A classic and powerful example of this was the risen Christ's words to St Paul on the Damascus Rd which result in his conversion:

Acts 26:14 When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It *hurts* you to kick against the goads'.

Here, judgement is offered in my own best interests. I can either hear this judgement and act on it. Or I can reject it. When John's gospel speaks of judgement it is invariably framed in terms of people *hiding* from the liberation/light/truth being offered to them in Christ:

"this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

This judgement is oriented to life rather than condemnation:

“God did *not* send the Son into the world to condemn [judge] the world, but in order that the world might be saved [healed/delivered] through him” (John 3:17).

We could even think of a physician’s laser beam which burns out a cancer in the body as being a form of ‘refining and purifying fire’ (Malachi 3:1-4) – the image of fire and judgement was commonly used to illustrate purification.

Secondly – the image of the parent. One of Jesus favorite terms for God is ‘Abba/Father’. The prayer that Jesus taught his disciples begins, ‘Our Father’ but we could equally say our Mother’(or if we had awful parents, imagine the most loving parent substitute we even had – the most who loved us the most). The prophet Hosea conveys this lovely image of parenthood, in which God says:

Hosea 11:1-4 "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.

Anyone who has been a parent knows that the part of parenting includes making *judgements* about a children’s behaviors in the interests of raising the child into a loving human being. We don’t always do this well because we don’t have the wisdom (or the patience) of God. But when we do this work of ‘loving (nonviolent) judgement’ well we are doing something good. Even judgement will be shaped by the fruits of the Spirit - peace, patience, kindness, generosity, self-control.

In a similar vein, parents sometimes need to allow the consequences of a child’s decisions to play out. This becomes more important as children move into young adulthood. Provided it is not directly life-threatening parents will often need to allow teenagers to make their own decisions and wear the consequences rather than step in to protect them. This is the way learning occurs. The way we can think about ‘wrath’ is in terms of natural consequences for actions. As a young man in the merchant navy there were times when I drank too much and ended up with an awful hangover. Suffering this physical effect and being expected to show up to work on time the next day could be considered a type of ‘wrath’ which I brought on myself even though no one was yelling angrily at me. In this sense, the *wrath of God* can be equated with God allowing the consequences of our decisions to play out.

Thirdly is the image of the Teacher: God’s loving judgement can be mediated through *teaching*. Jesus is frequently referred to as ‘teacher (Rabbi)’ and Paul lists *teaching* as one of the gifts of the Spirit and vital ministries in the church. I know that useful teaching has occurred when, amongst other things, a teaching by another person in a Christian community lovingly helps me to see myself more clearly, both the good and the not so good.

So to conclude....we see how essential it hold the fundamental image of God as Christlike always before us when we are reading the Bible. When we start with Jesus – when we know that our relationship with God is secure within a *loving irrevocable covenant*, then we can read texts of judgement, wrath and even hell, as teaching tools to make us pay attention to Christlike love – where it showing up and what is working against it. Hell is what we create on earth when we turn away from love. Hell maybe a conceptual possibility of willingly chosen separation from God, but we know as parents that we will never abandon our children and will seek or wait for them eternally. The same is true of God. Death is no obstacle to God’s love from us (See Romans 8:38)

The Russian Orthodox theologian, Olivier Clement reminds us of the meditations of the seventh century monk, Isaac the Syrian, who said, 'All God can do is give his love'. Clement tells a story of meeting a great contemporary mystic, Father Sophrony (1896-1993) of Mount Athos:

"I asked him what would happen if a human being refused to open their heart and welcome the love which was offered to them, and this is the answer he gave: 'Be sure' he said, 'that as long as there is someone in hell, Christ will be there with them'. And in that same tradition, all those who have written commentaries on Isaac the Syrian have reminded us that God stays at the door of every heart, even the hearts that remain closed to him, and that, if necessary, he will wait for all eternity

This is the judgement of God – it is inseparable from irrevocable covenant – Judgement is inseparable from love, and judgement is inseparable from eternal mercy. **Amen.**