

LOVE AND GENOCIDE

There are so many wonderful things contained in the Bible that it would be impossible to list them all –
the wise words,
the great stories,
the challenging parables,
the helpful descriptions of God,
the life of Jesus,
the excitement of the early church,
the hope and inspiration we can draw from scripture
is all there in spades.

And yet if we keep looking and keep reading there's other stuff too.
There are ugly bits - shocking bits!
It seems that the same Bible that tells us of a God of love also contains a God of Genocide.
It seems that God is at the same time a God of Love and a God of Hate.

There are many disturbing passages of violence in the Bible.

"You shall devour all the peoples that the Lord your God is giving over to you, showing them no pity."

(Moses in Deuteronomy 7:5-6,16)

This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Attack the Amalekites....Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants."

(Samuel in 1Samuel 15:2-3)

O daughter Babylon, blessed is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks!

(Psalm 137:8-9)

So, not only is the idea of killing babies by smashing their heads on rocks a good one, the person who does this is blessed by God!

What do you feel when you hear verses like this?
Does it square with your experience of God?

I know that I want to ask, *"Is this some kind of joke?"*
Is this really what God is like?

Now for atheists who are just dying to criticise and mock our faith, these kinds of passages have them rubbing their hands together with glee.
These bloodthirsty passages are weapons in their hands.

And for a great many thoughtful people these passages provide a reason why they can't be part of Christianity. They can't accept the Bible.
For them, these bloodthirsty passages are a barrier to faith.

And for countless people who *are* people of faith, these same passages are an embarrassment, and we don't know quite how to respond to them. In fact, what we usually do is just try to ignore them altogether.

Because for us they are a problem.
And they are a problem because of the way we've been taught to handle the Bible.

If you are trying to make sense of something it doesn't help if you get stage one wrong.

If you begin on the wrong foot then you're heading for trouble.

If you're doing an arithmetic puzzle which involves lots of wee sums, and you get the very first answer wrong and all the other answers right, when you reach the end of your calculations your answer will still be wrong.

This is what happens for many people today trying to make sense of the Bible.

One problem for lots of Christians today in reading the Bible is that we begin with the wrong starting point. The starting point was probably given to us by other people in our family, or in our church, and it goes something like this....

The Bible is a book that has been written by God and given to us by God.

This is God's message to the world, and God is perfect.

Therefore God's book will be perfect too in everything it says.

Another thing we have heard is the Bible is The Word of God. (In actual fact the Bible itself tells us that Jesus is the Word of God)

Many of us were told things like this and so when we open it up we assume that every word is God's Word and everything in it must be true.

And if we do that we are heading for trouble.

Because that's not what the Bible is.

Once we recognise that it really is an ancient set of books, things get easier.

The Bible is still the greatest of writings, still foundational, still a place to meet Jesus, still a place where God will often reach us – all the good stuff about the Bible remains.

But instead of being somehow like a magic book it's an ancient set of documents.

And we realise that it isn't always straightforward,

we're going to have to work with it,

and it's why we often say we need to be guided by the Spirit when we read.

If we believe that every word in the Bible is God's word and God's message to us then we've got problems.

Way back in the First Century there was a clash between Jesus and the religious leaders. Much of this was down to two different ways of reading scripture.

UNQUESTIONING OBEDIENCE v FAITHFUL QUESTIONING

For the Pharisees it was unquestioning obedience to whatever was there.
For Jesus it was faithful questioning.

Both points of view can be seen today - but only Jesus' way is helpful.
Questioning what we read in scripture is essential for our life of faith.

For people who feel that questioning passages in the Bible is naughty or just plain wrong, it might come as some relief (and maybe surprise) to know that this is what Jesus did himself.

As Christians we are in a good place if we are trying to copy Jesus.

The difference between Pharisees and Jesus...

The Pharisee's way superficially involves less thinking.

The Pharisee's way protects the text (the words) - Jesus protects people.

The Pharisee's way puts law first - Jesus puts love first.

Unquestioning obedience leads to ridiculous and monstrous notions of God that make God fickle, indefensible and unworthy of our love and worship.

It can mean us getting rid of our sense of decency and right and wrong in favour of some words.

I came across a classic example of this recently in a quote from the writings of a man called John Henry Hopkins.

This was in nineteenth century America and it was during the debates about slavery. One argument in favour of keeping slaves was that slavery was part of society in Bible times, and nowhere in the Bible does it say that it must be abolished.

Other Christians argued that the movement to free slaves was a movement inspired by Gods Holy Spirit, and that God was behind the movement to set people free. This was a natural extension to the work of Jesus.

So here's what this guy wrote – slightly old fashioned language - but these were his exact words...

"If it were a matter to be determined by personal sympathies, tastes, or feelings, I should be as ready as any man to condemn the institution of slavery, for all prejudices of education, habit, and social position stand entirely opposed to it. But as a Christian...I am compelled to submit my weak and erring intellect to the authority of the Almighty. For then only can I be safe in my conclusions."

(John Henry Hopkins, quoted by William Webb: Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology p216)

His assumption is that the "safe" way to read the Bible is to disregard our moral conscience, our compassion, our sense of right and wrong, ignoring everything we know about human psychology and mental health. This leads Hopkins to support the institution of slavery.

(Derek Flood: Disarming Scripture p129f)

Here is a man who deep down is repelled by slavery. He finds it distasteful and immoral. In his heart of hearts he does not support it. But because its not condemned in the Bible he reckons he needs to go along with it! He decides not to agree with calls for abolition to *"be on the safe side!"*

What a tragic attitude!!

How can it be that we can accept that God would act in a way that is immoral or unjust, or behave in a barbaric manner committing atrocities?

How can we think that the God of love is capable of doing things or saying things that we would condemn in anyone else – and only because some people said so in an ancient set of documents.

If God can behave immorally – if God can act in a barbaric manner then God is not a God of love and not worthy of our worship and clearly not a god that can ever be trusted or relied on.

So how did Jesus read the Bible?

He refused to accept everything that was written just because it happened to be there. What Jesus did was to reject passages that gave a false impression of God. If something was wrong he was not going to go along with that.

Some people want to say that because Jesus quoted the Old Testament that he must accept everything in it.

And because he said he had come to fulfil the Law it proves that he agreed with all of it.

But that's illogical and in fact is far from true.

What did Jesus mean when he said he had come to fulfil the Law?

It means he had come to declare what mattered and point us on the way to understanding what God is *really* like.

That meant rejecting ideas (including ideas in scripture) that were not worthy of God.

So sometimes Jesus broke religious rules deliberately.

Sometimes Jesus contradicted what was already written in the Hebrew Bible.

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount *"You have heard... but I say..."*

In Deuteronomy, we read, *"If you faithfully obey the commands God is giving you today, then God will send rain on your land. Do not let yourself be led away from the Lord to worship and serve other gods. If you do, the Lord's anger will burn against you and God will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain."*

(Deut 11:13-17)

In other words, God rewards good people and punishes bad people.

But Jesus says - that's just not true.

“God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous.”

(Matthew 5:47)

It doesn't mean that God doesn't care whether we are good or bad.
But it does mean that God does not play favourites.

Jesus in the synagogue in today's reading takes a passage from the book of Isaiah – it comes from the opening of Chapter 61.

It's a wonderful description of what Jesus' ministry is going to be all about.
Good news to the poor,
healing of the broken hearted,
freedom for prisoners..

And he reads it aloud.
The only problem is – this is not the whole text.
There are a few words right at the end that he deliberately misses out.

He finishes the quote by saying..
*“He has sent me to proclaim that the time has come
when the Lord will save his people.”*

That's the end.
But if you read Isaiah you'll see that Jesus has stopped mid-sentence.
Because the sentence there actually reads,
*“The time has come when the Lord will save his people **and defeat their enemies.**”*

That's what everyone was waiting for and hoping Jesus would say.
Let's see some warfare and punishment meted out.
But he doesn't.
Jesus misses out the bit about vengeance and the killing and the blood.
Because that is not what God is about.
That's not what God is like.
And never has been.
That's not part of God's plans and neither is it a part of Jesus' plans.
The only blood that will be shed in Jesus' ministry is his own.

So Jesus leaves out the vengeance part of that scripture because it is not what God is like. It's an example of people projecting their own ideas onto God, and getting it wrong.

So what am I saying today?
There's only one way to read the Bible that makes sense, that honours God, and that's to read it in the way that Jesus read it.

Some will argue that this means putting our fallible ideas about right and wrong over against a God whose ways are bigger than ours.

Who are **we** to do that?

But our sense of right and wrong is given us by God.

And while it is true that we don't know everything about God we can be sure that:

If God is loving, then God is not a genocidal maniac.

If God cares for the people of the earth, then God will not want them slaughtered.

If God cares for the poor and exploited then God will not agree with oppression and discrimination.

If God is love then God will not support torture or slavery or child abuse.

If God is love then God will not send a flood to destroy the whole earth.

If God is love then God will not plan to torture people for all eternity.

If God is love and trustworthy and dependable then God will not ever behave like a monster.

"The Bible is an ancient book and we shouldn't be surprised to see it act as one. So seeing God portrayed as a violent tribal warrior is not how God is but how God was understood to be by the ancient Israelites communing with God in their time and place.... In reading the Bible we are watching the spiritual journeys of people long ago."

(Peter Enns: The Bible Tells Me So...p231)

When we come across something in scripture that is immoral or hurtful or bullying or unloving we can be sure that we have an example of ancient people projecting their own ideas onto God.

As Christians we know that the best picture of God we have comes from Jesus. And Jesus through his life and teaching and example, **and by the way he handled difficult Bible texts** shows us a picture that is good news indeed.

God is not a god of hate but a God of love –
not a god of violence and anger but a God of support and compassion –
not a god who is unpredictable
but a constant loving presence on whom we can depend.

Luke 4: 14-21

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