

Violence in the Old and New Testaments - Little Ness, Sunday 10th September 2023

Habakkuk 1:1-13; Matt 24:1-8, 15-22

When Lucinda and I got back from Tim's wedding in Mexico last month I decided it was time I read the second book in Conn Iggulden's story of Genghis Khan, which my eldest son had given me many months ago. It turned out to be a good preparation for today. It's well written and it doesn't indulge in gratuitous gruesome detail, but you get a clear impression of the brutality that was central to his 13th century empire building. I was going to give you an example here but on reflection, even after some sanitisation, I thought it was too much for a Sunday sermon. But if you want to know more, do come and ask me afterwards.

As Christians we're used to the idea of violence: crucifixion is at the heart of our beliefs because violence was a way of life in the ancient world - it had been there since the beginning, almost. The first time the word appears in the Bible is on page 5 of Genesis: it's when God has to announce to Noah that he is going to destroy "all flesh" because they have "filled the earth with violence". Noah is the one exception and, reading between the lines, he would not have lasted much longer without God's intervention.

We have been looking at the character of God in the OT and of Jesus in the NT, first in relation to their anger, which Lucinda told us was different from ours. It is slow (long nosed) and righteous - a just response to human actions, and not vindictive or whimsical. Last week we heard how God introduced himself to Moses as a God who was full of compassion. We looked at examples of his compassion at work - on behalf of the poor, for widows, for orphans and for anyone who turned to him in trust. In particular it was something he longed to show whenever his beloved Israelites turned back to him after a time of disobedience. Jesus saw no inconsistency between his character and that of the one he called Father, saying "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father". Lucinda will be saying more about this next week.

When we read the Bible we see that the OT is full of violence, with God doling it out regularly, while Jesus is never violent - or is he? He overturned the moneylenders' tables in the temple. He said (Matt 10:34) that he had not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword. And our gospel reading was all about wars, famines, earthquakes and tribulations - Jesus foretelling extreme forms of violence in answer to the question "what will be the sign of your coming?". The 2nd letter of Peter explains that God is not slow to fulfil his promise of Jesus' return but is patient, giving time for all to turn to him. So Jesus's violence is "violence deferred". He exhibits God's anger and compassion in the moment, as God does in the OT. But while on earth he doesn't go about killing

people, or inflicting earthquakes or famine on them - that is reserved for later.

So what we see in both parts of the Bible is a tension between different aspects of God's character. Violence is less obvious in the NT because it is deferred, and we prefer to overlook it where we can. But it is there. How can we understand it?

We could ask whether we want to see justice done. We might like the idea of a kindly God who never gets cross with anyone / but would we want a legal system where no crimes were ever punished? Just last week, the Home Secretary called for the police to pursue every offence where there is a reasonable line of enquiry. Too many crimes are being ignored, she said. We know, and God knows, that justice needs to be done, but it is not for us to take revenge. "Vengeance is mine", he says in Deuteronomy [32:35] - and Paul repeats it in his NT letters [Romans 12:19].

Perhaps we want the justice but we don't like the method? Sometimes God's violence in the OT is directly inflicted - I'll come back to that - but often he uses human agents to administer it. This is what our first reading was about: God was telling Habakkuk that he was going to use the Babylonians (Chaldeans in 1:6) to punish his people for their moral and spiritual corruption. Babylon would conquer the Assyrians, but it would itself be overthrown by the Persians 65 years later / when a remnant of Judah came back to Jerusalem from exile. In the OT, God is explicit in allowing different nations to rise and fall at different times, ascending in capability and then overreaching themselves: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, all vying with each other in violence to achieve supremacy, but being used by God to fulfil his purposes.

So what alternative might God have had for dealing with evil? He had no prisons, no police forces and only unreliable legal systems - where they even existed. He created humans in his image to rule the earth, so if he was going to use human agents to administer justice it was going to be a flawed kind of justice. He could, of course, have intervened supernaturally, but he seems to have been very reluctant to do that. There are only 80 miracles recorded in the OT - on average just one every 25 years from Abraham to Jesus. Fewer than 40 miracles of Jesus are recorded and just one of those was in response to violence - to undo an act of violence by one of his disciples, ironically.

Sometimes God mitigated the harm caused by violence, using a conquering nation to protect the Israelites (we can think of Egypt in Moses' time, or Babylon at the time of the exile). On the small scale, he laid down that there should be six cities of refuge across Israel that people could flee to for protection and justice if they believed they were innocent of a crime. And although the violent methods of the ancient world may seem intolerable to us, for the nations using them, as for

Genghis Khan later, their societies often exhibited what we would think of as virtues, like courage, discipline, loyalty, healthy living, creativity and even their own form of justice. As Habakkuk said of the Babylonians, "they are a law to themselves".

It's important we understand that not all suffering is punishment, even when it is directly caused by God. A famine in Egypt was what brought Jacob's family to a place where it could grow into a nation in a protected environment - and through Joseph God provided storehouses of grain to allow people to survive through a 7 year famine. Jesus himself recognised that buildings collapsed and killed people through no fault of their own.

Matthew and other writers in the NT tell us that at the end there will be supernatural intervention / and justice will be done. There will be no more suffering, no more death and no more violence. All life will co-exist peacefully, as was always the plan. In the meantime we have to make choices as to how we respond. There is much in the Bible that can help us learn: we can wrestle with God, as Jacob did - physically; we can choose to be like Job, challenging God for answers on the pain we are suffering / and perhaps being met by him in response; or we could choose to be like Jonah, upset by the loss of shade from a tree while begrudging God's generosity to the people we hate. Which will it be?

Two days ago I started the third book in the Genghis Khan series to find his army encountering a column of Russian knights marching towards a crusade. It was a sad reminder that violence didn't stop after Jesus.

Let us reflect for a moment, making a prayer of these words from our first reading: "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you "violence" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds."