

1 Samuel 15. 34 – 16. 13

2 Corinthians 5. 6 - 17

Mark 4. 35-41

The story of the anointing of the boy David as king is so familiar to me. As a child I took it at face value, as it had been given to me. It seems like a jolly story of God choosing the ruddy-faced boy David over King Saul. But, as I prepared for today, I thought I had better do as I do each week and read either side of the set reading. It is a bit grizzly. Just before this anointing of the boy David we find an explicit, divine command given through the prophet Samuel for King Saul to commit genocide.

Samuel said to Saul, 'The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'" 1 Samuel 15. 1-3

It is no wonder people find the Old Testament obnoxious at times.

King Saul's armies do as they are instructed by Samuel, although Saul does preserve the life of the king of the Amalekites; and Saul's armies do take the best sheep and cattle as plunder. God, we are then told is displeased about this mercy. The chapter ends in this way just before we hear of the anointing of David:

Then Samuel in the presence of Saul said, 'Bring Agag king of the Amalekites here to me.' And Agag came to Samuel haltingly. Agag said, 'Surely this is the bitterness of death.' But Samuel said, 'As your sword has made women childless, so your mother shall be childless among women.' And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

This is spine-chilling in its deliberate intention to genocide. The whole tribe gone. The Amalekites are exterminated.

So, we might ask some questions here. Is this the God who says: thou shall not kill? Or is this another God, as some theologians were inclined to suggest, not being able to reconcile conflicting images of God in the Hebrew scriptures? Or is something else happening here?

I suppose I was raised to believe that every image of God presented to us in the scriptures is a right and true understanding of God, the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ. Or is that really so? We probably have all asked these kind of questions in some way or other. And found the responses inadequate, or flaky or simply downright dishonest. And we have suspended belief in some way – or our quest for faith. How do we reconcile that God says in the 10 commandments – you shall not kill – and here then orders the annihilation of a whole tribe? We have to be a bit discriminating here, ask some probing questions. Is Samuel really channelling God? Or is this powerful prophet running his own religious agenda – invoking God and doing

anything necessary to get his way; to see that his favourite candidate for king prevails? We need to be a bit fierce here about how we read. Because this is life and death stuff. Not just then, but in our own time.

The ultimate outcome of this story is that David becomes king and the nation of Israel expands to the largest it will be – either before this time or after. David's reign is also far from pure. There is much bloodshed during his reign and his behaviour is far from commendable at times. And the lives of his children are marred by violence and betrayal and discord, good sign that the parents are probably ratbags. This is not a happy family. But the memory of his reign prevails. Even today for Jews, David's reign is icon of the ancient nation of Israel, a vision at the heart of their identity.

But this memory for Jews of the reign of King David and the land over which he ruled is problematic in our own time. We have seen Jews' desire for a homeland to the exclusion of others flare up once again in the last weeks, as it has from time to time over the course of most of our lives. The Zionist movement which began in the late 19th century and led to the formation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 has been the driver behind Jewish assertiveness for decades now. Zionism arose substantially as a result of anti-Semitism in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. Over centuries Jews were treated very cruelly; all the way from local village to royal court. Christians have to accept that much of the motivation for pogroms against Jews arose from our readings of scripture. The gospels of Matthew and John are both problematic; explicit in their antagonism against Jews. Simplistic and hostile readings justified persecution of Jews in Europe for centuries. The way we read these scriptures without them becoming fuel for anti-Semitism is, no question, a challenge, though – but that's a subject for another time.

The imperative for Zionists for a Jewish homeland became supercharged in light of the holocaust during the 1930s in Germany and then WWII. This persecuted people needed to find somewhere they could live, confident that they could live without fear of persecution. They no longer wanted to be victims. Much of the logic for the establishment of the modern State of Israel was a scriptural one in the 19th century - driven also by British evangelicals and now by American evangelicals. Apocalyptic prophecies of the end of the age and the setting right of things by God are for some very attractive.

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures there is a longing for mount Zion and the temple on it at the heart of Jewish life and worship. When the leaders of Israel were in exile in Babylon much of the literature is filled with longing for a return. We read these passages as we prepare for and mark Christmas. [Isaiah 40]

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

This is a longing to return to Jerusalem – a divine longing in the human heart. A divine mandate for return.

As Christians hold that scripture contains eternal truths for us, so also do Jews. But, as we read, do we suspend our brains and our scepticism when wrong things are being done. As we know history is too often written by the victors. So we need to ask, was the replacement of King Saul by David a kind of religio-political coup and the tale we have heard a kind of polemic, where God is used to order justify genocide and regicide.

The modern nation of Israel is like a great gaping sore on the world. It seems an irreconcilable issue and it has become increasingly fraught to even express a view about Israel's treatment of Palestinians without being accused of anti-Semitism. The Queensland Branch of the Australian Labor party just in this last week tried to discuss the issue at their state conference. Any attempts to address questions about the action of Israel in the recent conflict seems to have been met with charges of anti-Semitism. If we don't meet Palestinian attacks with disproportionate force, are you saying you don't want the State of Israel to exist, goes the logic?

There is no question that the holocaust was one of the greatest tragedies of the modern era – a calculated and violent vision for genocide. But the world cannot continue to ignore the imbalance in power between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Israelis, along with those Palestinians who live in Gaza and the West Bank, occupied by Israel.

It is as though Jews victimised across centuries and particularly in the Holocaust, have become the victimisers now. This is a recognisable pattern of human behaviour: where the bullied becomes bullies; where the sexually abused become abusers themselves; where victims become victimisers. The State of Israel is repeating what has been done to Jews.

During May, in an act of provocation at the end of Ramadan, Israeli forces entered the Al-Aqsa Mosque and excluded Moslems from entering one of their most holy shrines during their most holy month. Two days later Israeli forces then cut the wiring to PA systems for services scheduled to mark the end of Ramadan. All of this is on top of an escalating eviction of Palestinians from ancestral farms land and homes – at the muzzle of a rifle and the threat of bulldozers. Palestinians are being displaced systematically and wilfully. This is government policy; this occupation is not being undertaken by bandits, but by people backed by the law.

The United Nations describes genocide in this way in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide

Article II

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

1. *A mental element: the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such"; and*

2. A *physical element*, which includes the following five acts, enumerated exhaustively
 - a. Killing members of the group;
 - b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
 - c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
 - d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
 - e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The French philosopher Renè Girard suggests that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are a long project – written over more than a thousand years - in working out the nature of God and the pattern of human violence and victimisation; all the while asking the question, is God involved in our victimisation of each other, or not? The story of Samuel and Saul and David would suggest that God is. But we need to ask the question, when we are victimised are we justified in victimising others or retaliating against the other. Samuel wreaks retribution against King Agag because generations before the Amalekites had resisted the tribes of Israel's invasion of their country. Setting up a long cycle of tribal violence.

The theologian James Alison refers to Jesus as the Forgiving Victim; the one who has been victimised but who returned to the disciples in the resurrection as forgiveness, not seeking retribution, not condemning, not annihilating, not perpetuating the cycle of violence but offering himself as a new way of being. Love one another as I have loved you.

Paul is writing to the Colossians says: Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ... in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

This is why in the church when we recite a creed together we affirm our belief that we have seen God in the person of Jesus Christ. And that the true nature of God is as revealed to us in Jesus. This is what the gospels and Paul give witness to. Not that God to offer us another way receives our violence and us another way. Jesus offers us the path to God; he is the path to God. As we baptise Haiden and Maicie we baptise them into the way of Christ. In the baptism we will recite shortly we say:

we acclaim Jesus as the Lord of the Church,
the head over all things,
the beginning of a new creation.

This is our hope. This is the heart of what we believe and hold to. He is the one who shows us the face of God and calls us brothers and sisters. This is our joy. This is our faith.

Andrew Boyle