

## Bennochy church 20th August 2017

If you look at the Old Testament you will find some very challenging themes; one is conflict and another is division. Throughout the history of the people of God, they are involved in waging war with all the nations roundabout them. After their Exodus from Egypt, they claimed the Promised Land by invasion, with a hint of genocide, and maintained it in battle. There is a thread of thought that goes like this; obey God, and you will be blessed by victory over your enemies. Obey God, and the nation will prosper. However, the battles were eventually lost and exile became the reality of God's people in both Assyria and in Babylon. So part of their identity was forged in battle and the lands they won, they did so in the name of God. I want to raise this question; was this the way that God wanted them to act, to win the conflict, and in so doing, claim the Promised Land.

Sitting side by side with conflict was division. Their theology was very clear. Only Israel were the people of God. There was a clear distinction between their relationship with God and how they understood the other nations in the region. Their God's were not God's at all. There was only one God of creation, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and that God was Israel's. After all, they alone had been given the law from God at Mount Sinai. The Promised Land was their inheritance by the promise of God, and theirs alone. They saw themselves as unique in God's sight, with an understanding, that as God's people, they would

be rescued from their enemies. God's Messiah was coming to save them.

History they say is written by the victors. In the case of the bible it is written by theologians, writing, not history, but with hindsight, and reflecting on what had happened, and trying to make sense of it. Why had God acted in the way he did? It must be because... of what we did or did not do.

Some credit must be given, for there are writings of scripture that are different. Moments where words are spoken, often by the prophets, shouting from the sidelines; desert voices challenging the status quo and asking people to listen, and change direction. The story is not as you think it is. The message of God, from the earliest of days, had been for all people. Was not Abraham to be the father of all nations? Was Israel herself not to be a 'light to the nations'? These are cracks in the traditional theology and many people did not like them and refused to listen. They are chinks where the light started to seep in. Openings where the love of God was spoken for all people. These are words spoken against the people of God and credit must be given, that these words were not removed or totally silenced.

The prophets also played the theological game of blessing and curse, popular in the Old Testament. Why do you think God is no longer listening to your sacrifices? Why do you think you have found yourself in exile in the foreign land of Babylon?

Answer, you have not lived as God wanted. Simple! It was never that simple. A huge journey of thought and faith had to be made, that emerged in the times of the New Testament, in the person, words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth.

This was no smooth transition. Jesus ministry clashed with the old thinking of Israel. As an occupied nation they were in no position to wage war against the Romans, many had tried and failed, but they still believed that they were the unique people of God. Their theology was still coloured with this idea of division and separation. Enter Jesus, who begins to talk about loving your enemies, and not the old way of waging war on them. He breaks religious conventions and Laws, and worst of all, he says to them, the Kingdom of God has arrived and, it is for everyone. Jesus seeks to replace division with unity and for war to make way for peace.

We have lost the impact of such a change in the thought process. It could be best summed up in the word 'shalom'. Jesus said, *'Peace be with you'*. We tend to neuter this expression, by missing most of what this word actually means. It is far more than the absence of war. This blessing of Jesus takes us far beyond a one dimensional understanding, of not waging war with our enemies. And remember war had forged and shaped Israel's identity.

The journey to Shalom, is all about unity and not division. Its root is to 'be at one with'. It is multi dimensional. It is not just a

oneness with God, it is only truly experienced when we are in relationship, with God's creation, other people and importantly, we need to be at one with ourselves.

Jesus takes the misunderstandings of the ancient people of God, in their centuries of wars and their sense of uniqueness, and in saying 'peace', he offers a new expression of God. It cost him his life. Tradition could not cope with a new understanding of God.

And these were the kind challenges the early church faced, and when Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, he said to them these words, *"Do your best to preserve the unity which the spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together."* (v3) The spirit of Jesus breaths his peace into the life of the church, and it is his shalom, that makes us one within the Body of Christ. This is our hope, as we witness within a world, that is still dominated today by conflict and division. Amen.