

Bennochy church 24th March 2019

There are bible passages, which at first glance, are ones I don't really want to preach on. In looking at 1st Corinthian chapter 10, that's today's reading on the lectionary, even with a second glance, some of it makes me feel slightly uncomfortable. It is not that there are not truths in the passage, there are, it is how to relate them to the world around us, and not the world around it author, two thousand years ago. The title is about worshipping idols, but we don't actually get that far. We could talk about idols. There are always things that get in the way of our relationship with God. We can describe them as idols. For another day.

Paul begins this section of his letter to the church in Corinth, by giving them a brief history lesson. The Jews amongst them would know all this, but Paul heavily interprets what happened. It's not history, it's theology. Paul uses the spiritual language of baptism and communion. It is almost as if he is describing the desert wandering as a sacramental experience. He even picks up the images of Jesus as both rock and foundation of faith, and the water of life.

We are told, in spite of all that God did, God was not pleased with his people. If Paul had stopped there, I believe we could accept that. As the people of God we are used to failure. It is what it means to be human. What I want to say, I am not keen on the image of bodies scattered across the desert; not because

deserts are not harsh and difficult places to survive, they are, but these dead bodies, are the direct result of the actions of God. That is the bit I have the problem with.

I am not sure how comfortable Paul is with that, but he is here using it as an example, of what happens when you disobey God. I am not happy with that. I want to ask the question, 'where is the inspiration of scripture' in these actions of God. What seems to be happening here, is that Paul is agreeing with the theology of the time. We are back to the blessings and curses of the book of Deuteronomy. Obey God and you will be blessed, disobey God, put him to the test, and disaster will strike you. Bodies in the desert.

What happened in the desert, may well have happened, it probably did, and many times over. As they crossed the desert, for all sorts of different reasons, people died. But in that ancient society, they understood these things as the consequence of their own disobedience. We must have done something wrong, look, thousands have died. Thousands may well have died, but it happened because they were trying to survive the desert. Paul is picking up this ancient theology and saying to the people of Corinth, there is your example, and if you disobey God, you will suffer the same kind of consequences. I just don't think that is a link we would make.

I am not sure if Corinth was any worse than anywhere else in the ancient world, or today, in worshipping idols, heavy

drinking and sexual immorality. But it worked for Paul, to recall the ancient story of what happened to the people of God, and say, be warned. That is what is going to happen to you. He is applying the theological pressure. I don't believe that theology. I don't believe for a moment, that is how God has ever acted. I would go as far to say, that is not the God I want to believe in. We are struggling to interpret this passage.

Let's move onto the next bit. We like the next bit. When life is tough, this is a passage to hang onto to. God will not test you beyond that which you can endure. When the testing comes God will give you the strength to endure, and provide a way out. To that we would say, Amen! So what happened to the people of God in the desert? By Paul's own words they were tested beyond that which they could endure. The one rabbit hole we don't want to follow, is this idea, well, they did not have enough faith. None of us have enough faith. I have always believed, that God's love is far stronger than our failures.

If Paul has moved onto ground that we are much more comfortable with. I still don't like his example or its implications, but at least there is now a realisation of who we are. That the norm is failure, and the strength of God, is not an act of revenge, but is his love, forgiveness and compassion. That is the strength of God. That is what Jesus talked about. These are core values of the Kingdom of God.

The bible is an evolution in how we understand God. Our is not a theology of revenge. We have moved on from that, or an 'eye for eye', or a 'tooth for a tooth'. An understanding way beyond it time. In Christ we have moved way beyond that.

Who helped the man mugged on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It was the unexpected compassion of the hated Samaritan. The errors of the prodigal son, who squandered everything, he was forgiven. Love is no longer just about family, friends and neighbours, Jesus said, it is loving even your enemies. Who finds himself in the Kingdom of God. One of the thieves hanged with Jesus. Jesus turns the ancient theology of blessing and curse on its head. If you pushed me, I would say Paul has got this one wrong!

This not a new God, who has somehow changed his whole nature from Old to New Testament. God has not changed. It has just taken us a bit of time to come to terms with understanding who God is. In this passage, we eventually come face to face with God, whose love is actually strong enough to take a bit of rejection, whose love is high enough, to embrace our mistakes, whose love is wide enough, to accept, all, into the Kingdom of God. Amen.