

God's judgement shines a light

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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I have many favourite hymns but right up there with the top 5 is the Battle Hymn of the Republic. I love the stirring tune and the fantastic words. I think perhaps it is also my Methodist mother in me who loves a good hymn to help you raise your voice in praise. However I very rarely choose it to be part of our liturgy. My eyes glance longingly over it each week and I can't quite bring myself to pick it. You see it has that difficult opening verse.

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He has loosed the fateful lightening of his terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.*

The God in this verse is much too vengeful and violent for me. The God marching in this hymn is the God of judgment with a sword in his hand. He is the God of John the Baptist who declares Jesus will come with a winnowing fork in his hand that he will use clear his threshing floor. The wheat will go in the granary and the chaff will be burnt with unquenchable fire. I have heard many interpretations that skilfully try and get around the vexed question of the judgement of God but the fact is this is not the only passage in Matthews's gospel where God seems to be a God of retribution. One of my practices on retreat has been to read just one Gospel for the whole time. When I did this for the first time with Matthews gospel I was struck with what seemed an overwhelming expectation of judgment and the exhortation to do the will of God throughout the whole book. I seriously spent the whole retreat looking for loopholes and deeply disturbed.

Nicholas Berdyaev, the Russian philosopher summed up my dilemma neatly. His words are really about power but they work just as well for retributive justice. He wrote, "*the god of Power is not God, but Superman created by man in his own worst image. He is not the God who lives in our hearts when we love and pity and forgive, but Caesar become absolute. Communion with the God of mercy and love is worship in spirit and truth, but to bend our knees to the god of Power is blasphemy.*" I would just like to forget the whole notion of God's judgment and go back to meditating in the peace of my study.

However, on this second Sunday in Advent as we are awaiting the coming of the Lord Jesus, who as our creed and scripture states, is coming to judge the living and the dead, I cannot actually do that. The trumpet has sounded forth and I know we need to deal with the question of judgement. I am urged on to do this because last Sunday evening I attended a service at St Marks, where David Neville, the New Testament scholar and lecturer, delivered a sermon on this very issue. So I now have his sermon and two of his academic articles to help and no excuses. Thank you David—I think.

David Neville thinks that part of our problem is that we understand God's justice and judgement from an all-too human perspective. We are the humans in Berdyaev's quote who create a vengeful God in our own image and give him the characteristics of a punishing deity. He is the tyrant father figure who meets out pain and suffering in accordance with our misdeeds and failings. If we look at the context in which Matthews's gospel was written we get a sense of how the writer could have envisaged such a god.

We all now know that the Gospels relate that Jesus' mission was conducted within the context of Roman imperial rule, with all the physical, psychological and structural violence that such a rule implied. The community of Matthews's gospel was a particular group within

this wider context. The book was written by and for a people who lived in the wake of the Judean war of 70 AD when the temple was destroyed and persecution increased. It was a Torah-observant community: that is, it followed the traditional Jewish practices as well as claiming Jesus as the Messiah. In short, it was an insular group of 'Christian Jews' that regarded itself as under threat from every side. It therefore staked its hopes on the returning Son of humanity who would judge the nations and thereby vindicate his long-suffering disciples. This hope and desire seems to cut across all oppressed groups, from the oppressed of the Old Testament to modern day sufferers.

Provisionally at the same time as preparing this sermon I have been reading *No Future without Forgiveness* by Desmond Tutu. It is about the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid Africa. The book is all about justice and judgment. Tutu writes of the long-suffering of both the blacks and whites of South Africa and how they longed and yearned for justice.

They longed for judgment that would vindicate the innocent and punish the guilty. As Tutu says the understanding of their very identity hung upon the acknowledgement of the crimes committed against them. After sitting through trial after trial and hearing harrowing stories of torture and violence, how the earth is soaked with the blood of so many innocent who have died so brutally, Tutu reflected that God must say at times, "*What in the name of everything that is good ever got into to me to create that lot?*" As he watches the awful deeds of his creatures he says with exasperation, "*Stop it or I'll come down and thump you*". Some would go further than Tutu and say that human beings deserve whatever punishment God wants to meet out and that sooner humans become extinct the better for the whole planet.

Yet the vengeful punishing God of John the Baptist and Matthews community is not the only or even the most significant picture of God in the New Testament. It is not even the most obvious and important one in Matthews Gospel. Standing over and against this picture and in fact interpreting it, judging it, is the figure of Jesus Christ, who although he warned of the judgment of God, incarnates all the mercy, love and forgiveness of that same God. And that makes all the difference.

Later in Matthew's gospel we discover that John the Baptizer seems not to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. In Chapter 11 he asks for some confirmation: '*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*' In response to John's question, Jesus offers not a catalogue of anticipated catastrophe but a roll call of the good he has done and the good news that has been proclaimed to the poor. The mission of Jesus to date has revealed the breathtaking moral vision of the Sermon on the Mount. It has also revealed that the blind have been made to see, the lame have walked, lepers have been cleansed, the dead have been raised to life and the poor have indeed received the good news. It is telling that in the list Jesus sends back to John, the culminating work of Jesus is not the raising of the dead but the announcement of God's blessing on the poor. It is telling but it should not be surprising. The Holy Scriptures are full of God's preferential option for the poor. The psalms, as just one example, are full of expectation and hope that the oppressed and poor will be vindicated, their fortunes restored and that justice will finally be served.

John the Baptizer however seems to have been more wedded to the idea of retributive justice, also found in the Old Testament. He must have been surprised to hear that Jesus associated his mission solely with promises of restoration. Perhaps this is what perplexed John, leading him to doubt whether Jesus is truly God's messiah. For Jesus the overarching vision is not of punishment, it is the restoration of God's Kingdom, the restoration of his creation. It is also the overarching vision of the whole of salvation history as recorded in the bible. Yes there are times when the wrath of God is unleashed against evil but the end is always the same—

restoration, a coming home, reconciliation—things finally becoming as they were created to be.

For we humans, whose default position seems to be revenge and retribution, restorative justice is an uncomfortable and difficult process. When the arguments about how to deal with South Africa's bloody history raged after the end of Apartheid there was a strong push that the past should be forgotten. There was also a push for a Nuremberg style court and punishment. Tutu and others opposed these extremes. The first would enshrine denial on an unprecedented scale and simply increase suffering. The second would cost millions and create the very fear and oppression the new South Africa had now rejected. As Tutu says, "*we could very well have had justice, retributive justice, and a South Africa lying in ashes—a truly pyrrhic victory if ever there was one*". Instead they chose the third way of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the way of restorative justice. It has not of course been perfect yet as Tutu reflects they had to balance the requirements of justice, accountability, stability, peace and reconciliation. The commission and the new state were but human and so are we, prone to make mistakes and get things terribly wrong.

In our struggle we must turn to the God of love, mercy and light to help us in this journey, this new way of being. God is our ultimate judge and arbitrator but we need to remember that this judge, this reconciler, is also the one who preached the Sermon on the Mount, healed the sick and who for love of others died on a cross. He is the one that Isaiah says will judge with wisdom, understanding, counsel, might and fear of the Lord. This is a judge who comes not with revenge and darkness in the heart but with the blazing light of the knowledge of God. As the prologue to John's gospel puts it, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

This light is a constant judge, not just one that is switched on with the second coming or when we stand before the throne of heaven. It is the eternal light that shines into our lives each and every moment. It is the light that reveals the layers of our being and helps us see ourselves humbly and therefore clearly. It reveals the darkness and shadows in our society and culture. It is a guiding light that leads us into restoration and reconciliation. It helps us make the right choices and take the right actions. It is such a good that even if we fear its revelation and demands we should welcome it joyously on behalf of those who walk in the darkness – the darkness of oppression and poverty, the darkness of war and violence, the darkness of guilt, shame, confusion and hatred. We should be yearning for the coming of the light and singing the refrain of the Battle Hymn of the Republic as loud as we can, "Glory, glory, hallelujah, his truth is marching on".

For we look to the light of God's truth to reveal our shadows and our love. We trust that the same God, who through love died for us on Calvary, will forgive and restore us just as he did the penitent thief. We hope for the restoration of the whole of creation and all those who suffer and we look to the Lord of all to have mercy on all humanity—because brothers and sisters, we need it. Amen.