

Is religion the cause of warfare?

St Philip's Anglican Church
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost 2017
Revd Martin Johnson

Genesis 25.19-34; Psalm 119.105-112; Romans 8.1-11; Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

The school holidays have drawn to a close. How did you get along with your brothers and sisters (if you have any)? I know many brothers and sisters who are very close, but I also know of others who are not. Some are estranged, sadly, over long periods of time. Many are never reconciled. Statistically over one third of siblings struggle in their relationships with each other. It's nothing new of course; it's almost in our genes. The Biblical first parents gave birth to sons whose rivalry ended in murder. Sigmund Freud claimed that sibling rivalry was all about the competition for parental love and attention. In the case of Cain of Abel that parent was God.

This rivalry reaches its tragic zenith in war and I'm quite sure that, at some stage, you have been confronted by the argument that religion is the cause of all conflict. Without religious faith, many say, there would have been no 9/11 attacks, no Israeli-Palestinian conflict, no 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, no violent disputes over words in holy texts, no Islamic State. There is much of this thought around, along with the idea that when eventually we manage to eradicate religion the world will be a peaceful place for all. They are arguments that have been very strongly and very cleverly put by folk like Richard Dawkins. There is a good argument, however, that behind what appears to be religious conflict there is something quite different. A recent study found that the economic, ideological, political or social systems of a state, were the main factors in nearly two thirds of modern conflict. Religion was often merely a cover that somehow gave the conflict its meaning, albeit a skewed one. ISIS is a case in point.

But there also is a school of thought that says that monotheism has much to do with the issues of violence. Because of sibling rivalry, we end squabbling over the one God, seeking parental love and attention, God's affirmation, God's blessing. I have some sympathy with this thinking. After all, look at the OT stories. In Cain and Abel what do you see? You see sibling rivalry. After those two you have Isaac and Ishmael, in today's Old Testament reading Jacob and Esau, then Joseph and his brothers and so it goes on. I think that even in Jesus and John the Baptist there was the potential. David Hume the 18th century Scottish philosopher wrote that monotheism is less pluralistic and thus less tolerant than polytheism, because monotheism stipulates that people pigeonhole their beliefs into one.

I don't like to think about religion being the cause of conflict and I have often argued against it, citing political movements like atheistic communism as being far more violent. But sometimes I am not convinced by my own arguments. When I was in Afghanistan, we had to work hard to ensure that our mission was not thought of as a new crusade. I was surprised by the thinking of small number of soldiers who quite liked the idea. They were not conventionally religious and they certainly weren't historians, but the concept of crusade gave meaning to their experience and they wanted to wear the cross of St George. Yes, there is some truth in those who claim that religion has played a part in the violence of the world and continues to do so, but religion is also quite clearly part of the answer.

What the patriarchs didn't have, what our fellow monotheists don't have, what David Hume didn't consider and what those soldiers didn't grasp was the Christian doctrine of the incarnation and the Trinity. This is the answer. Folk so often claim that the Trinity is not Biblical, but I say look again, look at the text this morning from St Paul: *For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh) so that the just requirement of*

the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Now there's more theology there than we can deal with this morning, but clearly God, coming into the world, enters into our world of sin, enters into our division in 'the likeness of sinful flesh.' This sin is epitomised on one level by the conflicts between nation states that have catastrophic potential and on another by the inner conflicts that take place within each of us and are the beginning of all violence. But what does this really mean?

In another place St Paul wrote: ... *we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* This hasn't answered the question I know, but it highlights that God in Christ becomes intimately involved in what it is that keeps us from God and from each other. In the Old Testament we read of story after story of family feuds, violence, and every possible kind of abuse. And yet the outcomes are never straightforward. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks the former UK chief rabbi, writes "the book of Genesis is full of stories about sibling rivalry, and how it keeps getting overcome, and the apparent winner becomes the actual loser, or servant." It is never a case of "I am the chosen one", in the way we might understand it. God subverts the rivalry and, in the coming of Christ, we see the ultimate subversion of rivalry. God enters completely into the world of "who is right, who is chosen" and turns it all on its head. God does not take sides in the way we might understand that, and in the end Christ died because of it.

The first part parable of the sower stands alone. It suggests the liberal, indiscriminate, gratuitous sowing of God. There's no careful selection or election here. Just the spreading of seed, the seed of God's word, his project, his idea: sowing seeds of imagination for us to nurture that we might see ourselves and others differently. That we might see that the outcomes of our rivalries are never what we think they might be. There are no winners and losers, it is never straightforward.

Is religion the cause of warfare? On one level the answer is yes, but on another much broader level, the God that we know in Christ, crucified and risen, removes the rationale for conflict and is the ultimate answer to that which divides us. Let those who have ears listen! Amen.