

## *To preserve the rights of others*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
Fourteen Sunday after Pentecost—10 September 2017  
Revd Martin Johnson

*Exodus 33.7-11; Psalm 149; Romans 13.1-10; Matthew 18.10-20*

The Synod of the Diocese meets next month and I for one will be watching with interest the conduct of the synod, as well as the business that comes before it. The spirit in which the synod is conducted says much about the well-being of a diocese. And I am hopeful that it will be conducted in a spirit of humility and good will, that there will be genuine listening and reflection on the issues of our day.

Synodical government is an important element of Anglican polity. At its best, it is certainly our strength; at its worst, it is our weakness. It is said that the problem with the Papalist model of the Roman Catholic Church is its centralised authority, whilst the problem with our communion is our dispersed authority. For us each of the bishops is an equal and acts within the constraints of the college of bishops. They in turn lead through synodical government; but ultimately all authority is exercised under God. Yes, it has its flaws, like democracy, but, at its best, it is a good model. Where two or three are gathered.

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Not my words, but those of Professor Richard Dawkins.<sup>1</sup> A superficial reading of many Biblical texts would suggest there is a truth in Dawkins words. We cannot get away from the fact that our first reading today is problematic, to say the least! This YHWH, to whom we were introduced last week as the voice from the Burning Bush, appears to commit atrocities to enable the Hebrew people to escape the clutches of the increasingly oppressive Egyptian regime.

I cannot and I won't try to paper over the cracks of difficulty that such texts present. But they do provide us with some theological grist to the mill. From Genesis onwards, it is clear that we, humankind, are not God.

The current crisis brought about by the regime of North Korea perhaps provides us with a modern-day parallel. The Pharaoh was a god to the Egyptian people, but the message that comes through from the text is that any person who sets themselves up as a god will fail. Successive patriarchs of the Kim dynasty in North Korea have done just that with outrageous stories of miraculous births and extraordinary feats on the golf course! The dynasty will, of course, ultimately fail. The question of course is, at what cost? The people of the Korean peninsula have suffered greatly. Families have been divided for decades, the North remains a dangerous, oppressive pariah state and further sanctions, which seem inevitable, will only serve to plunge the population into further poverty leading even to starvation. And the cost of war is too much to contemplate. Which begs that awful question: justice, at what price?

I have been reading some Dietrich Bonhoeffer recently. Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran Pastor, stood up to the regime of Hitler and was executed for it before the war ended. It is extraordinary to think that many German households actually erected shrines that featured a photograph of what they thought of as their dictator's divine countenance. They said prayers on his behalf—even directed prayers to him. Bonhoeffer wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he speaks of giving up one's own rights. He wrote: 'The right way to requite evil, according to

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), ch. 2.

Jesus, is not to resist it.' He went on to write that when a Christian meets with injustice, 'he or she no longer clings to their own rights and no longer defends them at all costs.' However, as Bonhoeffer became increasingly aware of the horrors of the Nazi regime, he wrote that whilst we may renounce our own rights we can never renounce our responsibility to preserve the rights of others. And so another awful question: how far do we go to protect the rights of others?

St Paul in today's much debated passage from Romans suggests that we must be obedient to the authorities of the day— another text which requires great care. It is one that has been used and abused by autocratic regimes to demand obedience. Hitler's regime used it to demand submission from the German churches, their submission was the beginning of Bonhoeffer's crusade against the regime which would lead to his death. The apartheid regime used the text to justify its position in South Africa. I think Paul was frightened for the safety of the new Christian communities in Rome, given the persecution of the day. But clearly Paul also states that ultimately all authority comes from God and that is important in our thinking; no government is a law entirely unto itself.

In our Biblical tradition, there is no place for the unilateralism that goes hand in hand with totalitarian or autocratic regimes. Those who set themselves up in such a way, whether in ancient Egypt, war time Germany or modern day North Korea, Cambodia or Venezuela will fail. The question for us as Christians is: how far do we go to protect the vulnerable from these regimes? The parable of the lost sheep suggests that there are no bounds to the effort to rescue the lost and vulnerable. Leaving the ninety-nine doesn't sound like good farming practice to me: many farmers would cut their losses and look after the ninety-nine. But these words of Jesus suggest that we must go after the lost and vulnerable. Such an enterprise entails risk, there is a cost.

Recent times have seen a move toward isolationist policies in the West, which will not serve justice and peace in our world. Whilst that famous text 'when two or three are gathered' is set in the context of church discipline, there is no doubt that it can be validly applied to different situations. History has shown us that poverty and oppression are linked to autocratic, oppressive, isolated regimes. Countering such regimes requires us to work together through the United Nations and other international bodies. Isolating ourselves will serve merely to strengthen those who would threaten peace and security. The liberation of the Hebrews came at a terrible cost, just as today there is cost and there is risk. But is the cost even greater if we do nothing and allow evil to thrive. As Bonhoeffer discovered, we cannot renounce our responsibility to preserve the rights of others.

Amen.