

SERMON: 2017/09/10 - BTR

KIDS' TALK:

[Invite children to sit on the floor at the front.]

Imagine you saw some children throwing stones at a wounded, cornered animal.

I did once: in the Caribbean. We were living there - as missionaries; and I saw some children (gleefully) torturing a scruffy, petrified chicken. And I was only 12, but I shouted and waved my arms, and got between those children and their victim and carried it off to safety. (We named her "Bob," and she took to roosting in our garage.)

But what would you do in a situation like that?
And what if the children didn't listen to your pleas for mercy? And persisted.

This was a bit like the situation facing God in our *Genesis* reading.

From His throne (in Heaven), He was shocked by the Egyptians' (racist) treatment of the hapless Hebrews, and doing the right thing demanded that He "step in" and rescue them: so He sent ten plagues! He sent swarms of frogs - *yuk(!)*, and lice - *yuk(!)*, and flies - *yuk(!)*, and germs - *yuk(!)*, and boils - *yuk(!)*, and locusts - *yuk(!)*; but nothing would stop the Egyptians from being horrible.

So He 'struck down all the firstborn' - that's the boys - in Egypt. [Ex. 12:29]. And this was a very unpleasant thing to do, but it "did the trick," and the Hebrews were finally released to go home. And they were so happy to be free, that every year since then - for about 3 and a half *thousand* years(!), that's what they've done: it's a big party called Pesach or "Passover."

Let's pray: Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for saving the Hebrews - the Jewish people, the people of Jesus, and through them making possible our salvation by Him on the cross. Amen. (Bye!)

[Ask children to depart]

So you heard me suggest just now, to the children, that the final plague was a "good" thing; a thing to be grateful for. But how can that be, when what we're talking about, to be clear, is infanticide, and on a large scale?

And there are, of course, those who see this episode as an '*appalling*' one - one which '*...do[es]n't* speak well for God [at all]', but, rather, reveals Him to be

'cruel'. [n.1]

Perhaps this is *your* opinion?

Well, if it is, you've misunderstood what's taking place here [gesture to the Bible].

Consider this: consider you made a beautiful, priceless, *irreplaceable* container, but there were many things inside - *trapped!* - that you wanted out of it, which were themselves precious and wonderful: how would you feel?

How would it feel to have to *break* that container?

Would you hesitate?

Would you feel conflicted?

Would you be *upset*?

And what if that beautiful, priceless, *irreplaceable* container was endangering (somehow) its precious, wonderful contents?

Would that make the choice to break it open easier?

Perhaps. A little bit.

But would you *really* be happy to *break* it?

No! It would be so frustrating - urgh!

What would you do?

You'd pace around wouldn't you? Back and forth, arguing - *debating* - with yourself; trying to conjure up some other option.

Maybe you'd appeal to the beautiful, priceless, *irreplaceable* container; offer it bribes and so on.

But, ultimately, you'd have to do the right thing - the *just* thing; and having dithered and deliberated - weighing up the "pros" and "cons" - eventually the need to avert the danger to what was trapped and vulnerable would compel you to intervene - *with force*.

Well, this was the moral dilemma God faced on that day long ago.

And yet to let that unhappy situation continue would have been another "crime"

in addition to the one already taking place, right? A crime of neglect.

So, He intervened - *and it was violent*, and bloody, and it broke. His. Heart.

Or at least it must have done, because whilst the author of our text doesn't *presume* to describe the Almighty's (internal) feelings about ending the lives of Egypt's heirs, we know - *we know* - that He has an 'unshakeable love for [all of His] creation' [n.2], both sinners and saints, and it must have been *torture* - for Him - to watch part of that turn on itself: like a parent catching one of their children *abusing* a younger sibling. The *horror* of it.

And Pharaoh and his people wouldn't be dissuaded: don't forget that. And it is for that reason - their insistence on continuing in sin, which *necessitates* this tragedy; and every moment of it will have been repellant to God: given His nature as love itself [1 Jn. 4:8], to carry out the tenth plague against the Egyptians would have *ruptured* His very being, which brings me to the observation that I want to make this morning:

Did you notice how the Hebrews were instructed to wipe the lamb's blood on their doors as a sign *for themselves*? That's what our text says: "'The blood shall be a sign *for you*.'" [Ex. 12:29]

And isn't that interesting? Because we popularly imagine, I think, that the blood is supposed to "ward off" Death, keep Him away from victimising the wrong families, like a magical charm to protect against the "Evil Eye" or some similar nonsense; but what we *actually* hear is that it was for *their* sakes. The question is, then: "Why?"

As a reminder. As a reminder of the sacrifice that *God* was making to set them free: the terrible sacrifice of doing something that was completely and utterly contrary to who He was. A reminder that their salvation came at a great cost to Him; they were to give up something they cared for - the very best lambs [see Ex. 12:5] - so that they would always be mindful of what God had lost: that something had to be broken to bring about a greater good in Creation.

And for us Christians, the same is true in regard to Jesus on Calvary. *Again*, by a loss of human life - Jesus' - God *ruptured* Himself - and in a number of ways:

- 1) By the indignity of the incarnation, which required a *partial* abandoning of His essential characteristics to become like us: finite and fragile [Phil. 2:7];
- 2) And by His offering of Himself as our substitute on the cross to make what was wrong right: that cry of "Why have you forsaken me?", you see, 'occurs *within* the Trinity itself, not externally to it'. [n.3]

And why would He inflict this on Himself? To set men and women like us free -

And so we should reciprocate as the Hebrews did: by sacrificing things that are dear to us - not young sheep, of course - for who has those these days(?), but certainly property and comfort and luxury (as we're commanded to do throughout the New Testament).

Furthermore, this is why we should take risks of speaking critical truth as we're encouraged in *Matthew 18*, of offering correction - with humility - to those around us. Because true love doesn't turn a blind eye to dubious moral choices. It didn't in Egypt and it shouldn't today.

How could you say "No!" to doing that?

What objection could you make?

For He has been injured by His interventions for us. '*Injured*' [n.4], and our lives should reflect that knowledge - that *enormous* gratitude that is appropriate.

Footnotes:

1. Plotz, David (12th June, 2016), 'The Complete Book of Exodus', *Slate Magazine*, available at http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/blogging_the_bible/features/2006/the_complete_book_of_exodus/god_enjoys_the_10_plagues_way_too_much.html (My emphasis.)
2. Park, Andrew Sung (1993), *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Nashville, T. N.: Abingdon Press, 123.
3. Walker, Bill (19th May 2011), 'The Drama of Salvation: The Christological Soteriology of Hans Urs von Balthasar', available at <http://wawalker.com/tag/hans-urs-von-balthasar/> (My emphasis.)
4. See again: Park (1993), 113, 118.