

Genesis Chapter 1 / The Baptism of Jesus

There is a massive humanitarian crisis underway in the middle east. A people who have lived in the land for centuries have been displaced by a much more powerful people. An entire people in Palestine have been crushed under military might. They have lost loved ones. They have lost their homes. They have been bereaved and wounded, and now they are desperately hungry and thirsty. They can't feed or protect their family. Land that was rightfully theirs has been seized from them. They have been humiliated. Their rights as human beings have been ignored. They are utterly crushed. All of this because of the military superiority of one nation over another. An international atrocity is taking place. And the rest of the world seems incapable of doing anything at all to help. And, perhaps most appalling of all, some in Israel have been claiming that the suffering inflicted upon this broken people is the will of God.

I am of course, talking about Israel – in the sixth century BC – when the Babylonian empire annexed this rebellious little nation. The ruling class of this nation were taken prisoner into Babylon and there they remained for two or three generations, an experience known as the 'Exile'. I realised writing this, how many times I have tried to describe this scene from this pulpit. Why? Why am I always banging on about the exile, always having to quote that psalm that summarises the exile so well – psalm 137 – by the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept ... No matter what passage is in question, why this constant return to the 'Exile'?

Well, it is mainly because it is a foundational moment in the history of Israel. Separated from the great temple in Jerusalem by hundreds of miles, Babylon is where synagogues were formed. The people would gather together in exile, read the Scriptures and pray. The exile was the reason for this. And the effects of this exile reverberate throughout the Hebrew Bible, and it lies at the heart of what we read in the New Testament. It is a question that is worth having in mind, no matter what passage of Scripture is being read. And it is deeply true of today's readings. The experience of people in this little nation, buffeted by the world superpowers, underlies both of today's readings.

Now, of course, when we look at the introduction to the book of Genesis, especially in a world that is busy celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, and the 150th anniversary of this earth-shattering publication, the Origin of Species, Genesis tends to be read in a very particular way. And for those who drive a modernist wedge between one area called 'science' and another area called 'religion', Darwin's book seemed to set up a deadly contest between the two! The Origin of Species on one side, the Book of Genesis on the other – as though the two books were alternative or even conflicting accounts of how the world began. And so the book of Genesis has been read as though it were a scientific document by both sides, who really ought to know better.

Theologians ought to have been more theological, and asked what was the context in which this book was written. Why was it written? What does it tell us about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Scientists ought to have been more scientific about the way they used the book. Having conducted complex studies about the universe, it is utterly incredible that so many scientists approach the book of Genesis without an ounce of care in examining what it actually is and how it works.

What is happening in Genesis? We have to go back to the experience of this people living in exile. This people who have been crushed. A people without hope, whose lives have been

turned inside out, whose God, so it seems, has been defeated. They are living in Babylon, whose might, whose technological prowess, whose architecture, whose very culture – question whether back in Israel, the temple really was God’s dwelling place after all. Especially now it had been destroyed. All hope was lost. Yahweh has been defeated. The world under their nose, is evidence enough that hope in God was futile.

And then, you hear the words – Beresheath Bara Elohim, hashamiim u eth ha aretz. In the beginning, Elohim created the heavens and the earth. It is a kind of prophecy. It carries the attention of the Israelite Exiles, away from the conditions of their captivity, up to the heavens above and the ground beneath their feet. This was no little tribal God who, like so many others, could be defeated when the tribe was defeated. This is the God of heaven and earth – who is beyond the reach of any empire, but who might use these unwitting empires for his own purposes.

Charles Darwin himself retained his early Christian belief for much of his life – seeing little tension between Christian belief and his scientific endeavours. It was not science that rocked Darwin’s own belief in God. It was suffering – the suffering that came with the death of his daughter in 1851. How can a loving God create a world that can be host to such pain? And far from becoming atheist he actually became a deist – someone who believes in a distant almighty creative force, not really interested in the suffering and affairs of mortals. For Darwin as for the ancient Israelites in Exile – faith in God was jeopardised by the experience of suffering.

But the text from Genesis lifts our focus away from our immediate context. When I collected Stefan from school this week, he asked me if we could buy a rocket and travel through the Galaxy. When I explained that I couldn’t afford to buy a rocket and travel through the galaxy he was very disappointed, so he shook his head and asked if we could just visit Mars instead. I had then to explain that it isn’t really possible anyway – so he replied, “how about the moon.” That’s a good compromise.

The Genesis text does not lift us from our reality, and move our focus so that we can spirit ourselves away from our experience of exile, away from our suffering and into some religious otherworldliness. The next chapter of Genesis shows God stooping to scrape up the soil, and quite literally get his hands dirty with human beings.

And here is the link with the Gospel reading. In Genesis, the spirit of God is hovering over the water. In the New Testament, the son of God is immersed in water. This God is not at a safe distance from his creation. He is baptised in the river Jordan, and comes to share the feeling and the fate of this beleaguered people, who – through injustice no longer at the hands of the Babylonians, but at the hands of the Romans, still feel themselves to be in a spiritual exile. They are refugees in their own land.

Of course, when we look at that land today, there exists a different people, a different set of refugees, a different people in exile in their own land. A new oppressor and a new oppressed. The modern state of Israel, which has to be distinguished from the Jewish people, has inflicted atrocities upon Palestinians. I heard on Radio 4 this morning, that in the three years preceding this conflict, Hamas had killed 11 Israeli people with rockets. In that same period, the Israeli Defence Forces have killed over 1100. Let me say that again, just in case we are tempted to see this as six of one, half a dozen of the other. Hamas rockets, that is, home made rockets, had killed 11 Israelis in three years, and in the same period the Israeli

Defence forces killed over 1100. Now of course, statistics like that it is easy to lose sight of the real lives involved – but the law of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth does not feature in Israel's ethical deliberations. But the Israeli propaganda machine is as effective as its military machine.

There are still countless intelligent people who believe that Israel are entirely justified in their actions. There are still people who believe that this is six of one, half a dozen of the other. There are those who believe that calling for an end to this mass slaughter is anti semitic. There are those who believe that opposing Israel automatically means supporting Hamas. There are millions of Christians who believe that this is a necessary war, because the temple in Jerusalem must be rebuilt before the return of Christ!

Goodness me! The Baptism of Jesus says the very opposite! When Jesus is baptised, he is implicitly condemning Israel's current way of being. To be baptised is to be returning from exile. A baptism is a little death and resurrection. And when Jesus, who embodies Israel itself, goes through the waters of baptism, he is saying that the old way of being Israel has ended and a new way has begun. It is no longer your bloodline, nor even the law that makes you a descendant of Abraham. It is your faithfulness to this Jesus. That is why, when Jesus underwent his ultimate baptism – a baptism of fire he called it – the curtain of the temple was torn. Before anything else, the tearing of the temple curtain meant one thing. That God himself has abandoned the temple.

The new temple is the people of God. That is why, as Baptists, a church is not a building – it is a people who have covenanted to be a Christian community. Jesus did not come to build a new temple, he came to be a temple. Where two or three are gathered together in my name, that is where my spirit will be! In the gathering of Christians in the name of Jesus, that is where Christ makes himself thoroughly at home.

So where is Christ in Palestine today? According to today's readings, we have to infer that he is with those who suffer. He has not kept himself at a safe distance from those on either side, who have been terrorised. But the fact remains that, according to the United Nations, there is a humanitarian disaster unfolding in Palestine, and Israel are ignoring the calls for a ceasefire to ease the suffering. And why should they, when they have so much public support. One website supporting the attempt to rebuild the temple described current events in Palestine as 'exciting' – Exciting!

I don't know what a Christian response to this crisis might be. All I can think of is a previous incarnation of the state of Israel, under the leadership of Herod the great, who slaughtered the children of Bethlehem. Anyone who has seen reports by Save the Children will see the parallels – there is no safe place for the children of Gaza, over 250 have now been killed, they have no food or water. No where for them to go. What is a Christian response – apart from the practical things we can do. Apart from the letters to MPs which we looked at last week, apart from the strategies that are easy enough to find if you trawl the websites.

In the first instance, the Christian response is not to follow the millions in saying nothing about this because it is too dangerous. We have the power to do something, and yet, if we do nothing, say nothing, then what kind of God do we reflect? We reflect the God of Darwin, who wanted nothing to do with human suffering. Engaging in this issue is difficult and it hurts, and perhaps the most Christian response begins with lament. This was the initial response to the actions of Herod the great in murdering babies:

A voice was heard in Ramah
Wailing and loud lamentation
Rachel weeping for her children
She refused to be consoled,
Because they are no more.

Let us pray to the God who created the heavens and the earth.
Let us pray to the God who was baptised into the suffering of his people.
Let us pray to this God of power and compassion, that our words, our actions, and our deeds
might reflect his.