

## Psalm 8: Revenge

Violence is everywhere – especially in my house, what with there being three boys. In fact, the only living creature I have seen, who exceeds their aggressive and violent tendencies, is their little sister. So, during the bank holiday weekend, what better activity to engage in than the construction of swords? Four swords, one of them, with a pink handle. Made from strips of wood, wound with silver duct tape to make the blade appear silver, and to soften the blows and reduce splinters, the hand guards were made from recycled coat hangers and the handles wound with racket tape.

Of course, it was asking for trouble. But there were surprisingly few injuries, and absolutely no tears. Only one questionable incident, in which Stefan's knuckles were accidentally struck. Thankfully, I saw the look in his eye and foresaw the horrors that would follow, so I intervened. And having restrained the seven year old, and suggested he had a break – he looked up at me and said, "Before I have a drink, I want revenge."

To be honest, he did say it with a grin, because it's the kind of thing he's heard on films time and time again. But then there is something deeply basic, deeply human, about the desire for revenge. Someone hurts you – you want to hurt them back. Oh, we can disguise it behind sophisticated patterns of behaviour, and legitimise it with multi-syllabic terminology – like "retributive justice." Or we can look at the headlines and the supposedly virtuous media calling for resignation of MPs because of their expense indiscretions. But whatever form it takes, revenge is there – and the desire for revenge feels like the most natural thing in the world.

And it is here in the psalm: "From the lips of children and infants, you have ordained praise, because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger." What is that about – kids praise being sung because of God's enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger! To quieten, to pacify the avenger. I doubt he was talking about Patrick Steed or Miss Peel. So why is God's desire to silence the avenger with children's praise, part of this celebrated prayer?

This psalm is well known. And the commentators point out that, Ha – if only our enemies knew the sheer power of God, they would realise that even our children are stronger than they are – so our enemies need to learn to praise God, and then they would no longer be our enemies.

This is the third time I have preached on this psalm in this church. And it is a beautiful psalm – usually understood as a celebration of the beauty of creation, and wonder at God's care for each human being. But this little piece – "even our kids praising God, can defeat our enemies – it kind of spoils the rest of the psalm." Well ... Either it spoils the rest of the psalm, or it is the whole point of the psalm.

The desire for vengeance is a basic human desire, and it was not unknown in ancient Israel. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." You hurt me, so I'm allowed to hurt you back. Retribution, sanctioned by God. But, was it Ghandi – who said "an eye for an eye makes the world blind"? Whoever said it, they were onto something important. That the quest for vengeance escalates. The desire for revenge grows – it creates the "enemies" and "foes" of which the psalm also speaks.

In fact, the Biblical idea of an eye for an eye, is not a justification of revenge – it places a limit on revenge. If you have been hurt by someone, you're not allowed to hurt them back even more! Because that is precisely how violence escalates. My children remind me of that on a daily basis. Because when you have been hurt, justice is not at the forefront of the child's mind. It is rather, their own pain – and it is out of that pain they inflict pain in return, with no thought of the consequence. And not all of us grow out of this way of reacting. The law of an eye for an eye was intended to place a limit on the vengeance one person can inflict upon another.

If you are the person who has been wronged by another. If you have been wronged unjustly. The more deeply you have been wronged, the more that it affects the way you see the world. If you have been hurt in the depths of your being by what another person has done to you... the whole world feels different. Most of us cannot imagine what it means to have had a member of your family murdered, to have been displaced from your home or country, to have had everything that you own stolen from you – and be powerless to do anything about it. Some people, however, will have experience of the loss and pain that one can inflict upon another, a loss that reaches into the core of who you are.

And when that happens, when the unfairness runs so deep, the whole world looks different. Unless some form of retaliation is brought, some revenge exacted, then the whole world feels like it should crumble under the weight of unrighteousness. If the injustice goes unpunished, then the world no longer feels like a place where there is any fairness or hope or light.

So the way that human beings organise their living together, tends to take this into account. There are some forms of retributive justice that simply set about inflicting revenge for the party that has been hurt. And there are two means of achieving this: On the one hand, there is the idea of restorative justice, where – for the good of all – reconciliation is the primary goal. Think of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission at work in parts of Africa. Where victims and perpetrators are brought together in the quest for justice.

But there are also forms of justice that have no eye to reconciliation, no eye to the future, only to the past: retaliatory justice, where the only party to be considered is the victim – where there is no perceived relationship between the victim and the villain. On these forms of justice, the belief is that the victim can only be benefited by seeing the loss inflicted on the offender. In a nice, liberal and rather comfortable setting, we might look at this form of justice and consider it crude: the murderer must be murdered, the rapist raped, the defrauder, defrauded. But... when the worst injustices happen to you... maybe our beliefs would be changed.

The psalm wrote in a time and context where these kinds of injustices were commonplace. And yet, the psalm has a logic that anticipates the logic of the Gospel. How is the avenger to be silenced – and silenced is not the best translation. It is a word that means 'made to rest', pacified. How can the enemy, bristling with the lust for revenge, be freed from the need for revenge, how can the enemy put up their sword?

Something to do with the praise that God has ordained from children or infants... Does that mean then, that we go to church, listen to the young people sing a hymn and find ourselves miraculously freed from any desire for vengeance?

Maybe, there is the recognition here that violence escalates... from generation to generation ... feuds are bequeathed, as is bitterness and hatred and enmity. But God has ordained children – as yet untouched by deep seated quest for vengeance, to praise him. And what does that mean? What does praising God have to do with being freed from our desire to revenge.

Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord. It is there in Romans, it is there in Proverbs – in fact the logic runs throughout Scripture. But really – can God be trusted put the world to rights? Literally, can God be trusted to bring justice? To make this world where we feel the pain of injustice so deeply ... can God really make a difference? Is he powerful enough? And if he is, does he really care that much about plight? Now – read psalm 8 in its entirety! It reads like a deliberate call to leave vengeance and enmity in his hands!

Nice theory ... but still, it's a big ask. To make yourself believe that God can do this – doesn't actually mean that he will. Experience shows that we do not live in a just world. Can we even trust the psalm?

The Gospel reading complements this. The context is the coming of God to bring justice and deal with sin! And what does the Holy Spirit do? Jesus says “by taking what is mine and making it known to you!”

And who, more than anyone, understood more fully the injustice of the world? Who more than anyone, knew what it was to suffer wrongly. To be falsely accused? To be mocked and beaten and punished? Who could know more fully, the desire for revenge? And who exemplified more fully, this superhuman ability to leave this most basic human need for justice in the hands of God? To the point of crucifixion, and the ultimate abandonment of any hope in justice.

And it is right there, in that utter abandonment of hope, that God glorifies himself and makes himself known. When the Spirit of God raised this Jesus from the dead, this Jesus is vindicated! Justice is done. The world does look different, the hope for justice is not in vain.

And this Jesus promises to those who follow him, this same Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Truth. And let's be clear – truth here, is not some technical term meaning correct, or workable. The word is Aletheia, the opening up of the very depths of our being, the exposure of who we really are deep down inside – this is the Spirit of Truth, engaging us in our ugliest, most primal and basic desire – this Spirit of Truth is present to us.

And this is what we celebrate at Pentecost – not some charismatic, wonder-working fairy-tale God for super-spiritual grinaholics. Not some Spirit that bestows some warm fuzziness to molly coddle us through our otherwise godless life. Not some Spirit to make us feel better about ourselves, boost our self esteem or heal our superficial character defects. This is the Spirit of Aletheia – grasping who we are at the core of our being, able to reshape even our desire for revenge – able to reshape our quest for justice, able to awaken faith in the very God to which Psalm 8 draws our attention.

The Spirit of Truth enables us to engage with God, as Jesus engaged with God  
To see and feel and engage with the world as Jesus did.  
To praise God in the way that he has ordained children and infants should praise him – with a genuine openness in the depths of our being.