

Justice and Peace Network

Some Reflections on the Problem of Violence in the Bible.

The Old Testament.

When dealing with the problem of violence in the OT we tend to follow one of two approaches:

- 1) Concentrate more on the many passages where God is depicted as loving – much of Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, Deuteronomy.
- 2) Explain how the idea of God as a violent punishing war monger is all part of the historical and cultural conditioning of the author and that we can ignore it in good faith, especially in the light of the NT.

Neither of these approaches does justice. There are in the OT roughly three hundred passages which talk of people doing violence to each other, either a report or a threat or a command, or a lament. There are roughly a thousand passages which talk of God's violence or wrath; either a report of his slaying someone, or his threatening people with violence or description of him as a man of war. To ignore the violence in the OT is like making a study of Churchill and completely ignoring the fact that he was English. Violence is not peripheral to the Bible it is central, in many ways it is *the* issue, because of course it is *the* human problem. The central icon of our faith depicts an act of mob violence against an innocent victim. The Bible is in fact the story of the slow painstaking and sometimes faltering escape from the idea of a God who is violent to a God who is love and has absolutely nothing to do with violence. Or it is the story of how we got from this:

And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, "Shout; for the LORD has given you the city. And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction;..... Then they utterly destroyed all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and asses, with the edge of the sword. (Joshua 6:16-17, 20-21)

to this:

So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.... If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. (John 4:16, 20)

The Bible is the story of how we learned not to attribute to God or project onto him things and qualities that are merely human. Whether it is modern Islamic Jihadists claiming that merely human acts of terrorism are in fact acts of divine retribution, or people on the lunatic fringes of

Christianity waiving placards at homosexuals bearing the slogan “God hates faggots”, that tendency is still alive and well. The beliefs and attitudes that lie behind them are strictly speaking mythological.

The first chapter of Genesis is, among many other things, a sustained argument against the mythology of Israel’s neighbours. Most of these mythologies give accounts of the origins of the universe as some sort of cosmic battle between the gods. In other words violence, according to them, is part of the very fabric of creation. The great militaristic empires – Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, all relied on violence to maintain their status quo. How convenient then to have creation stories which in some way legitimise that. In contrast, creation in Genesis involves no violence at all, just a calm command from God and it happens.

Nothing makes this anti-mythological bias clearer than what Genesis says about the heavenly bodies in 1:14-19. Throughout the ancient world the Sun and Moon were major deities and the stars were the guiding force in people’s lives. A huge amount of cultic activity was dedicated to their worship and a huge amount of economic activity generated by astrologers searching for their meaning. All this was obvious and self-explanatory in the way that simple arithmetic is to modern people. To suggest that the Sun and Moon were not gods or that the stars did not guide our destiny was plain stupid, it was so obvious to everybody. But that’s what Genesis does. It studiously avoids the ordinary Hebrew words *shamesh* and *yareah*, because they sound very like the names of the Sun god and Moon goddess. It seems fussy to refer to them as ‘the greater light’ and the ‘lesser light’. But in doing so that author makes the point that that is all these things are, lights. As an afterthought he adds: and the stars, in Hebrew one word, *wehakkokabim*. The temptation to add something about them guiding our lives must be enormous and millions of people even today would concur with that. But the Bible is ruthlessly sober and cold-blooded about that which is not God. (Perhaps a modern parallel would be to imagine an academic theologian being confronted with a wide-eyed charismatic claiming that God had done all sorts of weird and wonderful things. Or imagine his reaction when confronted with some of the more bizarre phenomena of Marian piety – bleeding Madonnas, moving statues etc. We would regard his scepticism as a sign of strong, balanced faith, the devotees would regard it as a sign of his lack of faith.) This debunking of false claims of divinity, divine action or divine sanction we call demythologisation. A big part of the Bible’s message is that much of what we think is God is not God at all, but human projection. That is the basis of the prophets’ historical struggle against idolatry. They make it clear that where idolatry flourishes, so does injustice. If people can show that any human

arrangement, albeit an unjust one, is the product of the divine will, then that arrangement can be sanctioned and defended, and those who go against it oppose the gods or God. So for instance in India, some would suggest that if people are outcastes – dalits – it's the will of God and to try to help them move up the social ladder is to go against his will. I once heard an American evangelist preach that free market capitalism was the will of God, and to try to put any curb or check on that was to oppose God.

Jesus continually struggles with the mythology that people are poor or ill or marginal because that's the way God wants things to be. With the adulterous woman in John 8 he exposes the holy act of stoning which the crowd are ready to carry out in God's name as merely human violence, not thing to do with God. Perhaps nothing makes his stance clearer than this passage in Luke 13:1-5

There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

The mythology which he is debunking is: "bad things happen to bad people and God makes sure of it." In some ways it's very comforting for those on whom the tower has not fallen to think that this was God punishing wicked people. But it is attributing to God violence or suffering which had nothing to do with him, in which he wasn't involved. And this debunking lies at the very heart of the Biblical projects.

The theories of Rene Girard say that most human societies are continually threatened by violence within the group. This violence is the result of two things.

1. The nature of desire.

Girard has shown conclusively that people do not simply desire what others have, they desire what others desire. Watch two toddlers in a nursery full of toys. One picks up a teddy bear and begins carelessly to play with it. The other will soon enough turn from what he is doing and focus his attention on that teddy. He will try to take it off the first one, who in turn will stubbornly cling to it. The result will always be tears. In the space of a few minutes, an object which neither of them was really that keen on becomes an object of intense desire. Affluent parents may

solve the problem by buying another identical teddy, but one can be sure that their attention will soon move to another object. The whole of advertising, the fashion industry, art criticism and many other things are based upon this. We could say that Armani clothes are more desired than C & A because their cloth and cut are better. That does explain why frayed and patched jeans were so popular and why it is that the things our grandparents called ‘dungarees’ are highly desirable, even mandatory fashion items. The explanation is that because one person deems these things desirable, I too find them so, regardless of quality or usefulness. So imitation is the very nature of desire. Because this imitation is largely unconscious Girard calls it by the Greek term *mimesis*. The first thing that happens in the Garden of Eden that the serpent awakens a desire in Eve and Adam immediately imitates that desire.

2. Rivalry.

Soon it’s not enough simply to imitate the desire of another. Let’s say one person is clearly the best dressed man in the office. It’s not enough simply to model one’s self on him, to dress as well as him. Soon the model becomes the rival. The admirer will try to outdo the one admired and the two enter into rivalry.

Almost all human conflict is the result of people modelling themselves, (albeit unconsciously) on others and then entering into rivalry with others. All human conflict is about wanting what someone else has and desires –money, land, prestige, a spouse, a friend, power etc. every human society is threatened by this desire which becomes rivalry which leads to conflict. (It is no accident that the last two commandments warn against this mimetic desire. Covetousness is the reason why people kill, commit adultery, steal and bear false witness against each other, and if the Decalogue wants to stop those it will have to attack their root cause – desire. The Ten Commandments display an anthropological understanding which is remarkably spot on.) Developed societies have quite sophisticated mechanism for keeping this from getting out of hand basically the law, the police and the judiciary. In a society with no police force and no judiciary the basic mechanism to stop this internal violence is scapegoating and sacrifice. A group threatened with internal strife achieves initial unity by identifying one person as the source of all the trouble and uniting against him and killing him or expelling him. So all against all becomes all against one. Because all the internal tensions disappear when this mechanism kicks in, the experience is one of the scapegoat bringing peace, so the whole thing takes on an air of holiness. It seems that ‘good’ violence is used to drive out ‘bad’ violence. Very likely, because peace seems to be the result of the death of the scapegoat,

he is then considered divine. Scapegoating is still the way many groups bring about peace.

Whenever this happens people are a) always unconscious of what's going on, and b) always assume that God is on the side of the mob or the many and bringing about peace by killing or ostracising the victim. c) always assume that the victim is guilty and that God is therefore against the victim. The opinion of God and the opinion of the crowd are therefore identical. So When Jesus says *Father forgive them for they know not what they do*, this is not just piety or Jesus being kind. This is literally true. None of them have any idea that they are caught up in a process of scapegoating frenzy. They have no idea that the unity of purpose between the Jewish and Roman authorities is the result of this frenzy. It seems the only sensible thing to do. The Jews explicitly believe that they are doing the work of God. The Romans believe this killing is necessary to keep public order, so it amounts to the same thing.

Girard claims that this process is at the basis of all human culture. The Bible comes to birth in a society where this scapegoating mechanism is fully operational, but it is the genius of Biblical revelation that it slowly unmasks this process and shows it up for what it is and offers an alternative. Mythology tells of violent events, but tells it from the point of view of the society which benefited from that event, and therefore veils and vindicates the violence. The OT, slowly at first, tells of these events, but tells them from the point of view of the victim. This is not universally clear in the OT, but is dazzlingly clear in the Gospels. The central event in world history is the Son of God becoming the victim of this process, and then rising. In the passion story Caiaphas says: *It is better that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish.* (Jn:11:50) His is the voice of everyone, every individual, every society which has tried to solve its problems by scapegoating; the voice of reason, the voice of political common sense, the voice which speaks up for the 'common good'. It is the voice of pogroms, ethnic cleansings and final solutions, and has been heard countless times in history and has resulted in untold human suffering. But it is not the voice of the gospel. The gospel speaks with another voice, with the voice of the victim. That's why the Gospel as well as being a unique piece of theology is a unique piece of anthropology.

But let's start in the Garden of Eden. Adam gets into trouble because he imitates and acts upon the desire of Eve. The Bible makes clear that desire is the start of the problem. The serpent paints God as a rival, and when they are found out Adam and Eve blame each other and the serpent for their wrongdoing.

The very next development is the violence which begins to emerge from the rivalry between Cain and Abel. Bear in mind that this story

came into being in a culture where human sacrifice is common and is the way of securing divine favour when all else fails. One man performs a blood sacrifice which works. (When the Bible says that it was pleasing to God it means that it was religiously and socially effective.) The next performs a plant sacrifice which doesn't. He then kills the first man. The obvious conclusion in this culture is that this is an act of sacrifice – this is a holy act pleasing to God. But the biblical account is written to show that this is in no way an act of religion, just a murder and that God has nothing to do with it. The issue here is that ancient people were aware that blood sacrifices 'worked' – of course because they are a reflection of the initial scapegoating violence which prevent the group turning on each other. If we want to find out the purpose of sacrifice, we have to observe what happens when it fails. The purpose of sacrifice is to prevent what happens when it fails. Cain's bloodless offering failed to extinguish his resentment. If a mob unites in order to lynch someone and the victim escapes, that mob will start blaming each other for the escape and a huge fight will ensue. What happens here is basically the same. When animals fight, generally they have an instinct which will stop them fighting to the death. Human beings all too often seem to lack this instinct, this is illustrated both by personal homicides and by wars which escalate and claim millions of victims. When a conflict results in blood vengeance becomes necessary. And that vengeance can quickly spiral out of control. In our society we have police and a judiciary to stop that happening or to nip it in the bud when it does. But we cannot comprehend how dangerous the threat of violent revenge is for primitive peoples. Our text shows this clearly in 4:23-24. Lamech says to his wives; *I killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me. Sevenfold vengeance for Cain, but seventy-sevenfold for Lamech.*

The possibility of this awful bloodshed, the result of anger which wells up from inside and cannot always be explained is always just round the corner. Once this begins it cannot be stopped, so it must at all costs and by all means be prevented. Sacrifice exists to do precisely that. Human sacrifice is the obvious way and even in societies as developed as ancient Greece or the Aztecs right up to the arrival of the conquistadors it was part of daily life. All the anger and violence could be ritually directed against one victim, and that victim as it were takes on the violence of the whole group, he dies to keep the rest of the group alive. People scorn as primitive the idea that 'If we do not perform this sacrifice disaster will befall us'. But of course it is literally true, not just theologically. If the rivalry and latent violence within the group is not channelled onto something safe – i.e. the sacrificial victim, it *will* erupt and engulf the community – disaster.

(In the light of this we can see that the Psalmist's *My sacrifice is a contrite spirit* is not just a helpful pious thought. If the violence the results from rivalry is prevented by sacrifice, the non-sacrificial alternative is to find another way of making sure people don't get as far as that violence. A contrite spirit, a humble spirit, a forgiving spirit is the only possible alternative antidote to this. This will achieve what sacrifice tried to achieve – the end of violent scapegoating rivalry, but is in the end far more effective since it diffuses the root cause of the rivalry.)

Cain receives a mark to ensure that he will not be the victim of the scapegoating process. Criminals very often become such victims in the modern world. In prisons very often child murderers are tortured or murdered themselves by the other inmates. Clearly they are not exacting justice, they are making him the victim of their own base desires, but often hiding behind the mask of some sort of self-righteousness. This is what God seems to have in mind here and he takes steps to prevent it. Mobs and vigilante groups usually fall into the trap of perpetrating evil much worse than the one they seek to combat. Structurally what they are doing is scapegoating.

Many societies have a foundational story involving violence and killing but mythologised to make it all seem good. Rome and Thebes in the ancient world for instance. Genesis 4:17 tells us in an almost throw away line: *Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch.* In any other ancient society the killing of Abel would have been just such a foundational killing, and the author of Genesis, with this little line waves that similarity in our faces. But it's already been made clear that what he did to Abel was just a squalid, cold-blooded murder, so there is nothing foundational or noble or necessary in this. Anywhere else, the story of Cain would have become just such a foundational myth, but the Bible will not allow that.

Possibly a modern example of this foundational mythology is the way Hollywood, until recently, told the story of 'How the West was Won'. Within living memory the founding story was one of 'good' white people with a manifest destiny to tame and civilise this wild country and set up a republic which would be a laboratory for democracy. Native Americans were bad and uncivilised so if violence was done to them it was all with the best of intentions. No one would call what was done to them theft or murder or genocide. Now that the story has been de-mythologised we see it for what it is, one group grabbing the land of another and killing them in the process. Hollywood portrayed the myth as if it were history.

The Bible systematically destroys this kind of myth or shows it up for what it is. So the first part of Genesis seems like myth, at least to some, but in fact it is the opposite. It is anti-mythology. So when people ask us if the Bible contains mythology, we must answer no. But by that we do not mean in that Gen. 1-11 is necessarily historical truth in the way that modern people understand that, no. We mean that what myth tries to do – i.e. hide the violent origins behind human institutions, and what the Bible tries to do – i.e. expose them for what they are, are complete opposites. “Not long ago in our society the word ‘myth’ was a synonym of ‘lie.’ Our intelligentsia has done everything it could since then to rehabilitate the myths at the expense of the Bible, but in ordinary speech ‘myth’ continues to mean lie. Ordinary speech is right.”¹

We can begin to understand the lesson Cain teaches better when we look at the sacrifice of Abraham.

The Sacrifice of Abraham

Human sacrifice was a fact of life among people in the ancient Near East much more than we moderns realise. When Abraham eventually has a close encounter with the living God on the Holy mountain God makes it quite clear that he does not want this human sacrifice. Abraham is called the father of faith i.e. the initiator of the process by which people would realise that God did not require violence towards each other. The movement from human to animal sacrifice is an essential part of the process of our growth in faith.

This story also takes the veil of animal sacrifice and shows that it is trying to hide the violence of human sacrifice. Thus the first paving stones are laid on the way that will lead away from sacrifice of any kind.

Approximately 100 of the Psalms make explicit mention of the enemies, of the individual being attacked by a crowd. Here, for the first time in history is the voice of the individual victim being allowed to rise above the voice of the mob, who ordinarily assume that right, and therefore God is on their side. In the psalms God is always on the side of the victim against the mob, although sometimes the aggressor seems to be God himself – an understandable human reaction to great suffering. This, along with the praise of God is the main business of Israel’s prayer, and this is quite unique among the religions of the world. If we take the psalms as revelation, therefore in them God is teaching us how to pray, then the plight of the victim of mob violence seems to be one of God’s main concerns. Note that the book of psalms follows right after Job. In Job in some ways the question is asked of God: “Whose side are you on,

¹ R. GIRARD. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 115.

the scapegoat's or the scapegoaters'?" Or: "what sort of God are you, a God who wants sacrifice, a God who simply mirrors the opinion of the community on this question, or someone who transcends all that?" The book seems to be saying that God is not just the opinion of the community writ large. With that established the Bible is then free to portray such a God unambiguously and does so with great effect in the psalms. So, whatever the chronology of composition, in its canonical form the Bible allows the difficult and tentative insights of Job to be expressed and explored in great detail in the book which follows.

Nowhere is this made clearer than in the suffering servant song in ch. 53 of Isaiah.. Here somehow the crowd confess that they had scape-goated this victim/servant. They assumed that God was punishing him: *We thought of him as someone being punished, struck with affliction by God.* But they realise that not only was God on the side of this victim – something unique in the OT, but that through him God brings about healing: that this one who is cursed is actually the source of their peace *We have been healed by his bruises.*

It is possible that the prophet who saw these things happening in various ways in his own life and the lives of his people realised that some day there would be an individual for whom this would become truer and more real than ever before. He realised that the story was not over yet, that this was not just a reflection of things past but also of things to come. Leonardo da Vinci designed a helicopter some three hundred years before the first one was made. He knew that scientifically it was possible, but no one at the time had the technical competence to make his plans real, that had to wait. This song too had to wait for someone to come along who would make it really sing-able, whose life and death would make all it said come true.

The New Testament

Apart from the Crucifixion itself, perhaps the clearest illustration in the NT of how the scapegoat mechanism works is the lynching of the adulterous woman in John 8. Note that the woman here is guilty – Jesus does not approve of that, he tells her to sin no more. But God is always on the side of the victim and in a situation such as this the moral status of the victim is immaterial. The mob assume that God is on their side, and that their violence is good violence. Jesus, Rather than attacking this idea head on, simply defuses it, breaks the spell and robs the impending violence of its sacred aura.

When a mob kills someone, no individual has to bear the responsibility for the death. That's why if people are to be shot dead the preferred method is a firing squad, whereas an individual marksman

which would be much cheaper and simpler. In inviting the first stone Jesus is forcing the mob to face up to that responsibility. Now that he's said that someone will be responsible. The length of time between the first and second stone being thrown is a nanosecond. Once the process begins it's unstoppable. In line with the whole of the Bible, Jesus forces individuals to take individual responsibility for their actions.

Had the mob achieved their aim and stoned the woman they would go away with a peace having descended upon them. Peace thus achieved is the peace of the world gives. The whole of biblical revelation has been trying to wean people off this kind of peace born out of violence. Small wonder then that as part of his farewell discourse Jesus says: *Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace which the world cannot give, this is my gift to you.* (John 14:27) In the same passage Jesus talks about the indwelling of God: *If anyone loves me he will keep my word and my Father will love and we shall come to him and make a home in him.* (14:23) *Abide in me as I in you.* (15:4) The only possible antidote to this problem is making the focus of one's life a dedication to the non-violent God revealed by Jesus. When people abide in anything else, even a religious ideal, the result will often be violence.

The Eschatological Discourse 13: 1-37.

Few parts of the Gospels excite speculation as much as this ch. 13. Many have looked for confirmation of the immanent end of the world in our present time, Jehovah's Witnesses base their missionary outreach on the need to inform people of this. Although many want to understand this as Jesus talking about the end of the world he is talking basically about the impending destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and warning the disciples not to imagine that the very real human violence which will take place then has anything to do with God. He is trying to talk them out of the Apocalyptic mind-set.

Although the Temple had once been destroyed, nothing could appear more permanent than this site which had been used for worship for nearly a thousand years. At the time of Jesus, Herod had embarked on an impressive programme of rebuilding and enlarging. Everything speaks of grandeur and permanence. Josephus describes the amazement with which pilgrims would react to the polished white stone of the building, even seeing it from a considerable distance.

The Temple signified God's rule in the world. It was the place where the rule of heaven flowed onto the earth. Worship began there with Abraham's sacrifice. It was clearly a spot which God had chosen specially. It was also seen as a cosmos or a world in miniature. The real world was full of imperfection, but within the Temple bounds was a perfectly ordered world. It was the perfect prototype of which the world

was but a poor copy, it was the 'original.' Any suggestion that this was to come to an end would automatically trigger of in people's minds the idea that the world also was going to come to an end.

A modern parallel might be in order here. On the occasions I have visited Lower Manhattan and the World Trade Centre I have never failed to be impressed. Firstly by the sheer size and beauty of many of the buildings. All this money, all this power, all this assertive self confidence did give a certain feeling of security.

When watching the dreadful events of September 11th live, there was a horrible moment when the whole of lower Manhattan filled with smoke and dust. The pictures were being taken from quite some distance. What had happened was that the first tower had collapsed, but at first the BBC commentator had no idea this was the case and she said that it seemed some sort of a device had been detonated at ground level. Although sitting 3000 miles away in a living room in Liverpool I felt fear and tightening in the pit of my stomach. Perhaps my world was not so safe. I remember saying to myself: "My God this almost apocalyptic."

In Mark Ch. 13 we read of the disciples being awestruck and taken in by another urban complex of buildings:

And as he came out of the Temple, one of the disciples said to him: "look Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings." And Jesus said to him: "Do you see these great buildings, there will not be left here on stone upon another, that will not be thrown down." (13:1-2)

Jesus is not in any way awed by the impressive Temple complex. He will not endow it with any significance beyond its historical function as the place where the covenant is celebrated and people make their peace with God. Pretty important yes, but not possessing any eternal significance. And he doesn't want his disciples to be moved in that way either. Because if they give the building an absolute significance now, they will give similar significance to the events which bring about its destruction. They will think, in other words, that the end of the Temple means the end of the World, that's what we call the apocalyptic imagination. Of course they are still caught up in this. Matthew makes it even clearer that this is the way the disciples think: (Mt. 24: 3. *Tell us when will this happen and what sign will there be of your coming and of the end of the age?*)

I once met a priest in Rome who told me that if the Church ever decided to ordain women that would mean that the end of the world had come. Clearly what's going on in his mind is that if this happens his little world comes to an end, THE WORLD comes to an end. That is precisely how the apocalyptic mindset works and in this sermon Jesus sets out to relativise or debunk that way of thinking and to get disciples away from

Remember in the first talk how we said that Jesus refers in Luke 13 to the Tower at Siloam in order to de-bunk or de-mythologize the idea that the violent deaths of those 18 people was the result of God's anger. He tells them not to imagine that this is God's judgment on those people. To see the Hand of God in this is mythological thinking.

And in this sermon Jesus tells his followers to see the destruction of the temple and the loss of life that would go with it in the cold light of day as human tragedy caused by humans and nothing more ... that is gospel. I heard of an American evangelist who, trying to interpret the twin disaster said a couple of weeks after it: "The destruction of the Twin towers is God's punishment on America for allowing liberals, homosexuals, abortionists and feminists to flourish in her midst." That's mythology, no difference between that God and the God of the terrorists who destroyed the towers. In both cases that God is a hideous, bloodthirsty idol. The whole of the Bible is trying to unmask idols like that.

The desire to read more into things and events than they can bear is a constant human temptation. Jesus knew that rebellion would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and that people would read too much into this so he gives very plain instruction about what to do when this starts.

And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs. (MK. 13:7-8)

Zealots revolted against Rome in 66 and then cajoled people to join together to resist the Romans. They told people: "If you're not with us you're against us, if you don't join the siege you're on side of Rome."

That of course is the way of playground bullies & mobs, Jesus says *He who is not for me is against me*. That's very different. One is a call to join the mob, other a call to leave the mob & make personal decision for Jesus.

The zealots claimed that this siege was the final battle between good & evil, light & darkness and all on the side of God must join them.

Jesus in his sermon is saying basically: "don't fall for any of that last battle, holy war baloney, get yourselves out of the way, if you stay in Jerusalem you get sucked in."

Because the Christians did not go along with this they were hated by Jews for disloyalty, but neither were they pro-Roman so they were hated by all. *and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. (13:13)*

Josephus says 1.2 000,000 Jews died in the siege. Apparently No Christians. We mustn't read this apocalyptically.

The Jews died because they fell for the mythology, because they mistook a political lie for a divine truth. The Christians survived because they made themselves immune to the lie by getting out of the way, not because God loved them more than the Jews. To suggest that these historical facts mean that God punished the Jews & blessed the Christians is to lie & to make mythology all over again, to do the opposite of the gospel.

Since the advent of nuclear weapons we are aware of the real possibility that the world could end in a horrible orgy of fire and destruction. But, if there is a historical apocalypse it will be human, not divine. If we do destroy the planet God will have nothing to do with it. It will not be a divine act any more than the destruction of Jerusalem was a divine act. If we say God can use human agents to bring about his purpose in this way, once more we project our own violence onto him. Does God want people to die in a horrible way?

We read in John:

So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish." John 11:47-50

Ironically the thing which Caiaphas wanted to avoid by having Jesus killed– the destruction of the nation by the Romans – did happen in 70 AD. And it was brought about not by Jesus or his followers, but by rebels and zealots – precisely the people who *did* believe in violent confrontation as the way to overcome evil and establish the kingdom of God. They were people with an apocalyptic mind-set.

The Paraclete in John.

There are two Biblical words for the power of evil. The Greek *Diabolos* means literally 'the one who casts apart' or 'the one who brings division'. The Hebrew *Satan* means simply 'the accuser.' So it's the *diabolos* who gets a group going against each other, who fosters rivalry which quickly turns into hatred. When all this is going nicely, someone is accused, someone becomes the scapegoat. So the *Diabolos* becomes the *Satan* who convinces the group that the scapegoat is guilty and deserves to be expelled.

Jesus promises an antidote to this whom he calls the *Parakletos*, the one ‘called alongside’, the *advocatus*, to speak up for the person who is accused.

Unless I go, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I do go I will send him to you. And when he comes he will show the world how wrong he was about sin, about who was in the right and about judgement. (Jn. 16:7-8.). We see in the gospels that the principle of accusation and scapegoating is the way of the world. Instead of an accuser Jesus sends an advocate. Paraclete means literally ‘someone called alongside’ – a counsel for the defence, someone who will speak up for the victims. This goes against what mobs and societies want, they want someone to blame. No matter how much people try to silence it, this voice keeps speaking the truth. The world was wrong about sin because it identifies certain victims as sinners and persecutes them. About who was in the right because mobs always consider themselves in the right when in fact the burden of biblical revelation shows them to be always in the wrong. About judgement – well they thought that was the job of a righteous mob, whereas in fact that is the job of God alone.

The Satan creates unity – based on victimisation and exclusion, based on having enemies and defending ourselves against them. The strongest unity any human society is likely to experience is when it is at war. When a group or society so united no longer has enemies its unity starts to crumble. So very quickly it will find new enemies in order to create unity. The spirit brings unity in the opposite way, and a unity which always extends beyond the group. The unity we experience in our ethnically remarkably diverse parishes bears witness to the fact that people have developed loyalties bigger than merely ethnic ones. This is the result of people taking the consequences of having God as our Father.

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