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BILL GOODMAN

Texts and Terror

This article was first presented as a paper at the Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary, Addis Abeba Faculty Colloquium, on Tuesday December 11th 2001. It is concerned with the search for a Biblical Response to September 11th and subsequent events. Bill Goodman reflects on five quite different Biblical passages in the light of these events.

The five texts which form the basis for the reflections in this article are not printed here. We recommend that you read this article with your Bible open alongside the journal.

Introduction

When we made plans for the faculty Colloquium, I happened to notice the date which we had chosen. It fell exactly three months after September 11th and it struck me that this might be a suitable time to engage in some reflections on the events of that horrific and momentous day.

As someone who specialises in Biblical Studies, it seemed appropriate for me to focus on some biblical texts. But deciding which texts to choose was not easy. I have tried to maintain a balance between the OT and NT. Beyond this, I have simply decided to focus on particular texts which have caught my attention; is this procedure Spirit-inspired or simply arbitrary.

I read these texts and write as a white person with a western-style education, a committed Christian from UK who has been living in Ethiopia for the past three years (and previously lived in India for two years). All these facts will influence my interpretation of the texts and events, hopefully in constructive ways.

The lamentable loss of the lament

(Psalm 13)

One of the joys of teaching is the learning that you do. Teaching at the Graduate School last Semester showed me something which I had either not seen before, or used to know and had forgotten. It concerned the composition and genre of the Psalms: about one third of them are Laments.¹ There are actually more Psalms of Lament than Psalms of Thanks/Praise. The tone in a Lament is of sorrow, pain, abandonment, disorientation. The psalmist experiences trouble and turns to God for help. The trouble may come from one of three sources:

¹ e.g. Psalms 3-7; 9/10; 25-28; 54-57; 69-71; 109; 120; 130; 139-143.

- **The enemy.** The terms are general, names are not given. Sometimes the enemy seems to be foreigners. Generally the enemy is human, and seeks to harm or even kill the psalmist (57:4). Sometimes the enemy brings unjust accusations against the psalmist (7; 26; 27).
- **Internal.** The psalmist struggles internally with pain or other difficulties (6; 22:14-15).
- **God.** The psalmist feels abandoned by God (22:1).

Laments are found beyond the Psalter. David laments the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1.17); Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Habakkuk offer Laments.² Job, in response to the calamities which afflict him, offers up Lament, as he clings to an incomprehensible God³; his Lament binds him to God, even while he is accusing God. The prayers of Ezra (9) and Nehemiah (9) are prose Laments. Most notably, we have a whole book called Lamentations, giving Israel's response to the destruction of Jerusalem in acrostic form: a veritable A to Z of grief. In the NT Laments are far less common, but we find glimpses of them in Jesus longing and weeping over Jerusalem⁴ and his agony on the cross (Mk 15.33-39). Note also Revelation 18, to be discussed later.

Lament seems appropriate as part of our response to the horrific massacre and destruction we witnessed on September 11th – and, indeed, to the many other massacres and acts of destruction which take place in our world, but which are not brought to us so vividly through television. The horror and suffering experienced by the people of Afghanistan over the past 7 weeks will also lead us down the path of Lament. When experiencing the grief and shock of a calamity, people need to face up to it, measure its dimensions, find some words with which to order and express their feelings. In the Lament Psalms, Gods people *express* their feelings of hurt and anger; *submit* them to God; and finally *relinquish* these feelings in a genuine, yielding commitment. This freedom to express strong and disturbing feelings, knowing that God will hear what is expressed and value (not reject) it, gives power to those who are praying. Faced with terrorism, most people feel powerless, and this frustrates them greatly; the temptation is to respond by lashing out with further violence. Lament offers us the opportunity to experience and express a different kind of power: the power to speak out, to question God, to challenge the status quo.

When I look at modern worship songs from UK & USA and compare them to the Psalter, the Lament tradition is clearly lacking. The emphasis is much more on thanks and praise, and on the power of God. If sadness is expressed at all, it is only about the guilt of sin. The wider issue of the sufferings of the world is ignored. (There are a few striking exceptions: Kyrie Eleison by Jodi Page Clark; Who can sound the depths of sorrow by Graham Kendrick; Great is the Darkness by Noel Richards & Gerald Coates. But these stand out as unusual.) I suspect that scrutiny of modern worship songs in Amharic and other Ethiopian languages may reveal a similar imbalance.

2 Jeremiah 7.29; 9.10; 9.19, Ezekiel 19.1; 26.17; 27.2, Amos 5.1 and Habakkuk 1.2-17.

3 Job chs 3, 6-7, etc.

4 Luke 13.34-35; 19.41-44; cf Matt 23.37-39.

By our neglect of the Lament tradition, we deprive ourselves of important worship resources, and leave ourselves unable to make connections between our worship and the world around us; worship can easily become an escape from reality, instead of an engagement with reality. We practise denial, covering up the harsh truths of life; this may lead to resentment in the worshippers, which in turn can lead to unhelpful feelings of guilt (We want to face reality, we want to be grieved and be angry, but we are not allowed to do so because it seems to be wrong). From grief and anger we need to move on to appealing to God, and giving thanks and praise, as usually happens in the Psalms themselves; Lamentation is turned into praise as the response to being saved, as in Psalm 22 especially.⁵ But to bypass the Lament stage is a mistake. The proper setting of praise is as lament resolved.⁶

Some may say that Lament is itself a form of escapism: we gather together, beat our breasts, wring our hands and do nothing to put right the wrongs of the world around us. This is a danger; but it is a superficial view of Lament. In the Lament Psalms, the speaker usually shows a great concern for justice. Things are not right, and must be changed; accepting the status quo is intolerable; it is God's obligation to change things for the better. The petitioner seeks justice from God, who is addressed either as the legitimator and guarantor of the social process (as in Psalm 88), or as the court of appeal against the current social system (as in Psalm 109). These Laments keep issues of justice high on the worshippers agenda; this must affect our behaviour when we go out from our worship service into the world around us. But if we lose the Lament tradition, then our concern to work for a fairer world may be diminished, as the Psalmists concerns for justice fade from our memory.⁷

In Jewish tradition, the scroll of the book of Lamentations was to be read each year on the ninth day of the month of Ab, the day of mourning over the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Perhaps we should mark sobering anniversaries such as September 11th with worship including Laments, both ancient and modern. However, it might be unfair to expect this kind of worship in Ethiopia on that particular date, since September 11th is New Years day in this country; when celebrating a new year, other kinds of worship will also be appropriate. However strongly felt, the Western world's concerns should not be forced onto people of other cultures and allowed to muscle aside their valued traditions.

Some Laments also contain an element of self-examination, usually connected with the psalmists own sin and repentance. This leads us into our second text.

Samson the suicide bomber

(Judges 16:23-30)

Samson is one of the most disturbing and ambiguous characters in the OT. He is dedicated to God as a Nazarite in his childhood, a vow of exceptional holiness which is made, in the case of Samson, for life (Judges 13.7). Yet Samson proceeds

5 C Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1981, p 267.

6 W Brueggemann, *The Costly Loss of Lament*, in D. J. A. Clines ed., *The Poetical Books*, Sheffield 1997, p 85.

7 Brueggemann, pp 90-94

to keep none of the Nazarite vows, except the one about not cutting his hair. He touches a corpse, drinks alcohol, sleeps with prostitutes (and eventually with Delilah, one of the enemy). His life seems to be dominated by appetite and impulse. His behaviour is full of violence and humiliating his enemies; yet we are told that *the spirit of the Lord began to stir in him*, and later *the spirit of the Lord rushed on him* (Judges 13.24; 14.19). In his final prayer, he shows no repentance, no concern for Gods honour, no concern for others (not even his own people), only concern for himself in the eighteen words that he speaks here, the first person pronoun occurs five times: *remember me let me get revenge for my two eyes*. He seeks revenge for the injury he has suffered; thus he breaks two well-known commandments: the prohibition against revenge (Deut. 32.35) and an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth (Exod. 21.23f). The voice of God is notable by its absence in Judges 16; we are not told how God responds to Samson's prayer, or how God views his final actions. Even the narrators conclusion – *So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life* seems to suggest a note of tragedy as much as a note of triumph.

So how should we regard Samson? Is he truly a faithful champion, Gods strong man? Is this why Hebrews 11.32 names him as one of the heroes of faith, alongside Gideon, David & Samuel? Or are we to see him as some kind of Spirit-filled psychopath? Or perhaps as the man of enormous potential who never grasped that the Spirit's call to holy discipline is even more important than the Spirits gifts?

Part of the solution may be to beware of taking the Samson narrative too seriously. Commentators increasingly note the use of irony and humour in the account; at times Samson is larger than life, like a cartoon character. But the question becomes acute when we note that the account of the end of Samson's life seems to depict him as the ancestor of the hijackers and suicide bombers of today. He realises that it is possible to kill a great number of people if you are willing to die with them, and demonstrates that it can be done. At the same time as killing the Philistine elite, he destroys the building which symbolises their power and prestige: the temple of their god Dagon, to whom they give the credit for their success. The parallels between these achievements and the horrific events of September 11th are striking, and very disturbing. Current events in the Holy Land also strike a chord, as Palestinian suicide bombers bring death and destruction, provoking/provoked by violent military action from the Israelis. Moreover, one Israeli Jew, writing in the Jerusalem Post in 1985, expressed concern about what he called a Samson syndrome among some Israelis, who would be willing to take the entire Arab world with them into the abyss of annihilation rather than accept any accommodation with Palestinian Arabs as neighbours.

In response to September 11th, much of the talk has been about good and evil, guilt and innocence. Leading politicians in USA and UK proclaim a crusade, where good will overcome evil; one columnist in the New York Observer writes 'The world's losers hate us, because we are powerful, rich and good (or at least, better than they are).' On the other hand, some in the Muslim world talk of the evils of terrorism perpetrated against Muslims with the support of USA, in Chechnya, Bosnia, Lebanon and above all in Israel/Palestine. Islamic extremists use the phrase the great Satan to describe the USA, following the tradition of invective from the

days of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. Both sides are quite clear that God is on their side. George W Bush's ultimatum to the world 'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists' is echoed by the rhetoric of Osama bin Laden, calling all true Muslims to join in his defensive Jihad against the unbelievers 'America and its allies are massacring us in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir and Iraq.'

Defining terrorism is not always easy. Some who now acclaim Nelson Mandela as a great statesman and peacemaker may previously have regarded him as a terrorist, particularly in his younger years when he was involved in acts of violence. In the troubles of Northern Ireland, British people have always been quick to identify the IRA as terrorists, while sometimes ignoring the violence of protestant paramilitary groups. Afghans get up the morning after an air-raid, to find both food packets and unexploded cluster bombs scattered around their village; both are the same colour. Is this a form of terrorism, or an unfortunate lack of coordinated planning?

Contradictions and paradoxes multiply the more one looks at recent events. People apparently claiming to act in the name of Allah the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Forgiving, the Kind are prepared to slam airliners and their passengers into tower blocks full of thousands of people, or to blow themselves up in areas of Jerusalem crowded with young people. Osama bin Laden and his followers use weapons and training supplied by the CIA the US government promoted them as freedom fighters against communism in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Perhaps the next most likely target in the war against terrorism, Saddam Hussein, also received arms and training for his forces from UK and other western nations. The military government of Pakistan, shunned by the wider world ever since the coup that brought it to power, is now a trusted (and funded) ally of the West. September 11th will probably now become a major day of remembrance in USA, as people recall the brutal inhumanity of this massacre; yet for others it has long been just such a day, as they remember September 11th 1973, when fires burned in Chile as the elected government was ousted in a coup sponsored by the US.

Whose side is God really on? Is it as clear cut as we would like it to be? Perhaps the ambiguity of the life and death of Samson must make us pause before declaring confidently that God is on our side. Samson is very much the saviour of his people; yet he is equally clearly the self-indulgent sinner. We need to acknowledge that even the good guys, even those who suffer injustice, are themselves sinful and need to repent. Israelis and Palestinians are equally convinced that they are the victims of the others aggression/terrorism; becoming locked into a victim-mentality makes it very difficult to hear the other persons point of view. If we demonise others and see ourselves as good, we are able to avoid the painful necessity of self-examination. We no longer have to ask whether we might be partly wrong; whether we might, even in a small way, have contributed to the problem. We may even turn into the very thing we hate: in the words of a recent song:

They say that what you mock will surely overtake you,
 And you become a monster, so the monster will not break you.
 (U2, *Peace on Earth*)

If we respond to evil with fear and anger, we may be drawn into actions which are themselves evil.

Another important theological point to emerge from the story of Samson is the sovereignty of God. Yahweh is determined to save and build his people. Eventually they will emerge from the dark era of the judges. But this will happen, not because they are well led, but in spite of the poor quality of leaders such as Samson. Even when Gods people become their own worst enemies and their leaders fail them, by the grace of God they can still be saved. This leads us on to another biblical book which stresses the supremacy of God over all human powers and rulers.

Babylon blasted

(Revelation 18:1-11)

The magnetism of the final book in our bible is hard to resist. Here in Revelation 18 we see images of a great city, which had seemed so secure, powerful and wealthy, burning; the world looks on and is shocked at this seemingly cataclysmic event; some voices express grief, but others express delight. All this resonates with our recent experience. Can we say Fallen are the twin towers and the pentagon!? Or Fallen are Kabul and Kandahar!?

Yet at once we discover the dangers of this book. Its vivid images and symbolism can be interpreted and used in different ways; they are inherently ambiguous, multivalent. Closely connected with Babylon, for example, is the image of the Beast (Rev 13, 17). Over the years the Beast and its number (666) have been variously interpreted as signifying the Pope, Martin Luther, the prophet Muhammed, King Charles II, Oliver Cromwell, the city of Paris, Napoleon Bonaparte, Henry Kissinger, Saddam Hussein.... It is tempting to use and abuse these images to demonise those we disagree with, in the very manner I have just been arguing against. It is not without reason that some of our churches avoid the book of Revelation.

What is behind this vision? When John speaks of Babylon, what is in his mind? A small minority of scholars argue that he is thinking of Jerusalem; but most agree that in Revelation Babylon signifies Rome. Rome is the *great city* of John's day (cf 17.18; 18.10, 16, 18, 19.), with universal dominion (17.18), as Babylon was in the time of the OT prophets to which John alludes. The *blasphemous names* (17.3) are seen as an allusion to the titles given to the emperor in the imperial cult. The whore wears *purple* (17.4), the badge of imperial Rome. The opulence of 17.4 is a glimpse of the wealth for which Rome is so celebrated, and which is elaborated further in the list of cargoes (18.11-13). The use of the name *Babylon* is reminiscent of 1 Peter 5.13, where it seems to be a known cryptic symbol for Rome. In addition, the presence of the *shipmasters and seafarers* among those who mourn at Babylon's downfall (18.17-20) fits better with Rome (whose prosperity was built so much on her domination of Mare Nostrum, the Mediterranean Sea) than with landlocked Jerusalem.

However, the fact that John chooses the word Babylon rather than Rome or Jerusalem is significant. A number of scholars see Rome in John's Babylon, but interpret Babylon in much broader terms as standing for civilized human beings apart from God, humanity in organized but idolatrous community. Here is the

ultimate city, the world of man, created by him, expressing to the exclusion of every other tendency his will, his intelligence, his purpose – human, exclusively human.

As was Babylon. (Ellul, p 194). The spirit of Babylon is first seen in biblical history in the builders of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11.1-9); thereafter it runs through human history like a subterranean river, bursting out into the open at different times and places. Babylon here is an eschatological image (a counterpart to the eschatological new Jerusalem which replaces it in ch 21-22), transcending the original reference and becoming a symbol of the whole history of organised human evil whose fall will be the end of history. Thus Babylon is both a specific critique of Rome and a paradigmatic one of all evil empires, political, religious and economic.⁸

So we cannot simply pin the label Babylon onto USA or Afghanistan or any other nation today. But we should look out for signs of Babylon, the spirit of Babylon, in the politics of every era, including our own. Three aspects of this chapter seem particularly relevant to the subject of this paper: the sense of shock; the attitude of the onlookers; and the economic critique.

The shock of insecurity

One feature of Rev. 18 is the shock expressed at the fall of Babylon by the kings of the earth, the merchants and the shipmasters, and by Babylon herself: *I rule as queen, I am no widow, and I will never see grief* (v 7). Those who have power and wealth in this world use it to create security for themselves; they come to expect, even demand a secure life. In our airbag culture Europeans and Americans have in some ways become obsessed with ridding our lives of any sense of risk to our health, family life, finances etc. This has made the events of September 11th particularly shocking, because they have shaken that sense of security; people ask How is this possible? How could a thing like this happen? Those who live in Africa are more accustomed to lack of power and security; quite apart from intermittent natural disasters, many people experience uncertain food supplies, limited health care, unreliable communications, bureaucratic barriers, corruption, ineffective policing as part of their everyday lives. Suffering and death come as a shock to the wealthy and powerful; they are more familiar to the poor and the powerless.

The World watches

Another feature of this chapter of Revelation is the response of the mourners. The three groups of mourners, kings of the earth, merchants and seafarers look on from a distance with horror. They are clearly those with most to lose at Babylon's downfall. They are part of the privileged minority who have prospered through interaction with Babylon. Their concern is not compassionate, but self-centred; they weep, not for human beings overwhelmed by catastrophe, but because of the ruin of their economic self-interest: *no-one buys their cargo any more* (v 11). *The kings of*

8 R Bauckham, *The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18*, in *The Climax of Prophecy*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1992 and *The Fallen City*, in *The Bible in Politics*, SCM, London 1989.

the earth are probably modelled on the client kings and provincial ruling classes co-opted by Rome to share in her rule (including the local aristocracies of the cities of Asia). They lament the destruction of Rome's power, on which their own power depends. They may well have invested in and profited from trading activities. The *merchants of the earth* (18.11) serviced Rome's ravenous appetite for consumer goods; no doubt some of Rome's *purple* would have come from merchants linked with the clothing industries of Miletus, Thyatira, Laodicea and Hierapolis (cf. Acts 16.14). Many became the richest people of their time (cf. Rev. 18.23), as well as the most powerful. The *shipmasters, seafarers and sailors* (18.17), based in great ports such as Ephesus, also relied on Rome, the dominant trading nation, for their living.

Overland transport was inefficient and costly; for this reason, most ancient commerce in bulk commodities was water borne. The Roman historian Suetonius tells of the Emperor Augustus sailing into the Gulf of Puetoli just as a ship from Alexandria was docking. Passengers and crew of that ship honoured him with festal dress, incense and high praise, saying that it was by him they lived, by him they sailed, by him they enjoyed freedom and all the riches they had.⁹

Through the ubiquitous eyes of the media, the world has looked on from a distance at the events of September 11th and the subsequent war in Afghanistan. What has the reaction been? To a large extent, it has been different from that of the mourners in this text. There has been a huge outpouring of genuine grief and compassion towards those who have suffered. We notice it here in Ethiopia some of the Sudanese refugees at our church have expressed their real sadness at events in USA. Those who have suffered themselves have a great ability to empathise, and their hearts go out to others who suffer.

But other aspects of our onlooking may be less noble. During the excessive media coverage of September 11th, I found in myself a perverse (perhaps even perverted) fascination in watching the images of death and destruction aircraft slamming into the twin towers, the buildings crumbling into a huge cloud of smoke and dust replayed endlessly in slow motion. In the end I had to make myself turn the television off, to break the grip of these images. This desire to watch was not about my need for information, nor about concern or compassion; it was a macabre fascination with evil, an unhealthy addiction to horror.

Moreover, some of today's onlookers may have interests other than compassion at heart. Osama bin Laden's statements about the injustice suffered by Palestinians today have truth in them; but he was not noted for such comments until recently. One wonders if he really has their concerns at his heart, or is simply using them as an effective tool for his own propaganda. Others may have their own financial security at heart, perhaps looking for increased trade, aid or other favours from the US. Moreover, as the modern adage puts it, when the American economy sneezes, the rest of the world catches a cold. The economic impact of these events is of major significance; fear of a deeper recession shapes thinking and policy making. An attack on a less wealthy and powerful nation, even if it resulted in equivalent loss of life and destruction of property, would draw far less media coverage.

9 Suetonius, *Augustus* 98, pp 1-2.

Babylonomics

The OT presents Babylon as a great military power, crushing all who oppose it. The vision in Revelation 18 builds on this foundation, but grafts on a further OT motif: that of the city of Tyre (see Ezekiel 26-28). Tyre was noted, not for its political empire, but for its *economic* power, particularly as a trading nation. John sees Babylon/Rome as the heir of Tyre in terms of economic activity, which is married to her military might (In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned. Ezek. 28.16). Like Tyre, Rome is a greedy exploiter; a site of idolatry. The image of trade as *fornication* (v 3) shows Babylon as a temptress, corrupting those with whom she trades: her lust for more and more evokes a responsive lust among the nations; in it they are joined carnally with her.

John draws extensively on the Babylon and Tyre motifs from his OT sources; but from them he skilfully creates a fresh prophecy. He gives prominence to the merchandise imported to Rome. Two shorter accounts of the kings and sailors mourning the fall of Babylon frame a longer one, which depicts the merchants (18.9-10, 17-19, and 11-17). The merchandise imported by Rome is listed at length; it is then mentioned again four times in the following verses. John is seeking to highlight the imported wealth of the city. Most of the items listed are luxury goods. Others, such as wine, flour and slaves are not, but are bought in such large quantities as to constitute a huge expense; these epitomise not luxury, but massive over-consumption.

Babylon is condemned for her materialism and idolatrous worship of mammon. Moreover, Rome's trade is really a kind of fornication. Rome offered the Mediterranean world unity, security, stability, the conditions of prosperity. But in John's view these benefits are not what they seem: they are the favours of a prostitute, purchased at a high price. The Pax Romana is really a system of economic exploitation of the empire. Rome's subjects give far more to her than she gives to them. Rome's ability to dazzle and bewitch, combined with its military dominance, skew the forces of the world marketplace strongly in its favour. Trade becomes a cultural promiscuity by which one power exploits and drains the resources from many others.

The way Rome's wealth has distorted the attitudes of the wealthy and dehumanised them is seen particularly in the cheapness of human life. At the end of the list of cargoes comes the reference to *slaves that is to say, human lives* (18.13). Their position at the very end of the list, after all the livestock, suggests that slaves are regarded as subhuman, mere implements or livestock; a brutal contempt for human life underlies Rome's prosperity. A society which reduces people to mere commodities in the market place has sunk into the mindset of the Beast. This is underlined at 18.24: it is Babylon's wanton killing of human beings, (not just the Christians, but *all who have been slaughtered on earth*) that is condemned. Babylon is on trial for oppressing and murdering all kinds of peoples throughout her empire.

So this text asks some searching questions of those who have power: both those who dominate others through military might, and those who dominate through economic strength and world trade. We might think of the brutality of the Taliban and Al Quaida in enforcing their vision of fundamentalist Islam; also of the harsh effects of the economic globalisation promoted by nations such as USA and UK (not

least in Africa), perhaps a kind of economic fundamentalism. Where human life and dignity is not valued, so that wages are pitifully low and life is cheap; where the rich exploit their position to become richer still, and engage in excessive consumption while others have nothing – there we can see glimpses of Babylon in our world. In the recent words of one Muslim leader, we cannot live in islands of prosperity and progress while the rest of the world is increasingly caught in poverty, illiteracy, disease and insecurity (President Mohammed Khatami of Iran, in his speech to the UN last month). The structures of today's global economic and trading systems preserve and increase the dominance of the more wealthy, powerful nations. Current attempts to destroy terrorism do little or nothing to address these kinds of injustice; that makes them morally unacceptable, as well as pragmatically ineffective. Terrorism is not created out of nothing. It is from political powerlessness and visible injustice that the deadly rage of fundamentalist terrorism arises; despair and fury grow and thrive in the soil of discrimination and poverty. If bin Laden is caught or killed, others may well rise up in his place. Pronouncements from leaders in UK, USA and elsewhere about doing all in our power to respond to the crimes of September 11th ignore this dimension, focusing simply on military retaliation; this kind of rhetoric may reassure voters and markets at home, but does little to solve the problem.

All Scripture is inspired by God, and informs us. But the Christian must always keep coming home to Jesus, whom we meet most prominently in the gospels. How does Jesus speak to this situation?

Pointing the finger

(Luke 13:1-5)

My first reaction to this text is one of excitement and anticipation. Luke highlights recent situations of shocking injustice and suffering, where lives have been suddenly cut short by falling buildings and murderous intent. Jesus is prompted to comment on a gruesome massacre, and an unforeseen disaster. Parallels with September 11th seem vivid and apt; we wait eagerly for Jesus' response to these events.

My second reaction is one of disappointment and frustration. Jesus seems to avoid answering the questions that I want to ask: why did this happen? Where is God in all this? What does it mean? What about justice? Were those Pilate had killed actually guilty of any crime or provocation? Jesus seems to avoid these tough theodicy questions, and to point us instead to a kind of personal piety which ignores the pain of the world around us. What a let down! What a cop out!

My third reaction is to stop trying to force my own agendas onto the text, and to reflect on what Jesus says. Firstly, he is responding to the faulty theology of some of his audience; they assume that those who died must have been especially sinful and receiving Gods punishment, since (in their understanding) God rewards good behaviour and punishes bad. Jesus is rejecting this view. He challenges his immediate audience, and us as readers, to stop pointing the finger at others, claiming that they are more sinful than us. Nor can we point the finger at God and call God into question. Instead, God calls us into question; we must point the finger at ourselves. Let these shocking events confront us with our own frailty and prompt us to focus on God, rather than on the evil which we see in others around us. The repetition of Jesus call to repent at the end of these verses (13.5) adds emphasis to this clear message.

Jesus' call to repent here should not be a retreat from grappling with the harsh realities of suffering and injustice in the world around us. For true repentance will include these elements. Luke's gospel repeatedly emphasises God's concern that justice should be practised, not neglected.¹⁰ It is estimated that about 6000 children around the world died of diarrhoea on September 11th, and on every other day of this year.¹¹ If US \$25 million can be offered as a reward for the arrest of Osama bin Laden, and further vast amounts found for increased spending on security, then perhaps money is not so tight after all; Western nations can do more to cancel debt and reduce poverty in poorer nations. A war against poverty and injustice may be the most effective way to win the war on terrorism. The key is not finance, but a matter of the will. True repentance produces fruit this is another theme emphasised in Luke's gospel.

This challenge from Jesus about individual repentance also reminds us of the basic gospel message which all Christians are called to spread. Once we have responded to the gospel ourselves, we must share the challenge with others. Proclaiming the message of the kingdom, by word and deed, is the most powerful response we can make to acts of terrorism. For this message can change hearts and lives, transforming people's world view and their actions. It is more powerful than all the awesome array of weapons being focused against terrorism, in Afghanistan and around the world. For the violent response to terrorism currently being undertaken by USA, UK and other nations will surely only prompt more acts of terror in due course. If all this provokes a bigger war, perceived by some as the Christian west against Islam, then the terrorists will have succeeded in their aims. Something more powerful is needed to break the cycle of violence and revenge; only the gospel message has that power. Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.¹² We must recommit ourselves to proclaiming the gospel.

The other major theme emphasised in this passage is the inescapable and universal reality of judgment. Judgment will overtake all who do not repent, be they Galilean or Jerusalemite or of some other origin. The word *all* is tolls repeatedly like a warning bell throughout this passage (v 2, 3, 4, 5). The parable in v 6-9 shows the amazing patience and mercy of God in graciously holding back his judgment for a time; but the final words *if not, you can cut it down* emphasise that judgment is not forgotten or abandoned, and will surely come upon those who refuse to repent and bear fruit. This must surely give us encouragement and hope. Rulers have a responsibility to seek justice for crimes committed against their people (Rom. 13.1-7) though seeking vengeance is not to be part of this (note the preceding verses, Rom 12.14-21). But earthly rulers do not always succeed in their quest for justice. Some of those who are guilty of terrible crimes in our day are caught and brought to justice; others are killed by warfare or assassination; others still escape human justice and live comfortably. But none can finally escape God's judgement. Eventually all must stand before him; and justice will be done, by the One who is truly fair and righteous.

10 Luke 11.42; cf 1.51-55; 4.18-19; 18.1-8; 19.8; 23.13-25.

11 New Internationalist, Nov 2001, p 19.

12 Martin Luther King, quoted in New Internationalist, Nov 2001, p 27.

Can anything good come out of Ground Zero?

(Genesis 50.15-21)

In this passage we find a truly astonishing idea, which goes on to run through the rest of the scriptures: God takes the evil that human beings do, and somehow God uses it to bring blessing. God overrules the plans of the wicked to achieve his own purposes of good. We see it in the story of Joseph, who suffers deep injustice from his brothers and others; yet God uses this to save many lives, as Joseph helps the people of Egypt to face a great famine. We see it in the experiences of Gods people through exodus and exile; in the lives of Daniel and Esther; also in the wisdom tradition (Prov. 16.9; 19.21). We see it most amazingly of all in the cross of Christ, where the horrifically brutal and totally unjust suffering of an innocent man is used by God to bring unimaginable blessings and benefits for humankind. 'Grace finds beauty in ugly things'.¹³

Can we look for God to bring some good out of the evil we have witnessed in our days? It is hard to imagine anything good developing from the twisted shards of steel that rise up from Ground Zero in New York; or from the bomb craters and devastation of Afghanistan. Yet we must look for them. We have already seen the bravery and self-sacrifice of the firefighters in New York, and the vast amounts of money and blood spontaneously donated by the general public, not only in USA but further afield. We see the resentment felt towards the US among some peoples and nations now tempered by sympathy for the sufferings of ordinary Americans; and we see some Americans now stirred to be less ignorant and indifferent about the struggles of the wider world. We also see new alliances and relationships developing between nations, which open up possibilities for closer relationships. And the burden of a particularly oppressive regime has been lifted from the shoulders of the people of Afghanistan.

Will God use the horrors we have seen and experienced to deepen our compassion, and our commitment to the needs of others? Will these events remind the world of other horrors in other places, places where suffering and injustice continues long after the media spotlight has moved on in its relentless search for the next big thing? To borrow a popular Amharic word here in Ethiopia: *yechalal* it is possible.

If there is any common theme which emerges from the bible passages I have looked at, it is the need for repentance. Lament often includes an element of repentance; the Samson narrative shows that even the good guys are sinners; the fall of Babylon challenges those who are secure, powerful and indifferent; Jesus emphasises the need for each of us to repent; Joseph's brothers are faced with the challenge of repentance. This could be part of the good which arises from such appalling evil; repentance is the beginning of genuine change. It has to begin with me.

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