

Sermon for 17.5.15.

(Readings Acts 1:15-17, 1 John 5:9-13, John 17.6-19)

I'm going to start by taking a leaf out of Alan Gibson's book and asking you a quiz question. But I would ask you to bear in mind that Alan is an honourable man, and a gentleman, whereas I am....a bit sneaky.

Here is an alarming quotation, and afterwards I'll ask you who said it.

"The issue, then, cannot be whether or not genocide is intrinsically good or evil – its sanction by a holy God settles that question.....the issue has to do with the purpose of genocide. ....biblical genocide is in line with the character of God himself."

Was it:

- (a) Mullah Omar (spiritual leader of the Taliban)
- (b) Osama bin Laden
- (c) An anonymous spokesman for Boko Haram in Nigeria

Well of course, because I'm sneaky – I warned you! - the answer is (d). The writer is a Christian, formerly a Professor of Old Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary and President of the Evangelical Theological Society.

You may be relieved to know that he's talking about the Israelite conquest of Canaan, and not actually advocating genocide now (Although I'd like to think he doesn't represent most Christians any more than ISIS represents most Muslims!). But if he is talking about God as a warrior – and to be fair, that's an image that is used in the Psalms, and is implied in this morning's Psalm as God protects the righteous but "the way of the wicked will perish" – what implication does that have for the prayer of Jesus we heard in today's Gospel, when he says of the disciples....

"While I was with them, I protected them in your name....I guarded them, and not one of them was lost (except the one destined to be lost), so that the scripture might be fulfilled". (And he also goes on to pray for their future protection)

What form does that protection take? We trust in the faithfulness of God, and yet we see daily in the news - from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, Egypt – the persecution of our brothers and sisters even unto death. I do not know how we dare to compare the recent cases of Christians being banned from wearing a cross at work or going to industrial tribunals with what faces them. We are brought up powerfully against a new Holy War, where our adversaries (who have killed far more Muslims than Christians, I should point out) see us in the same light as perhaps we have traditionally seen the Canaanites – those who stand in God's way, the bad guys who get what's coming to them. Perhaps this shouldn't surprise us: Jesus says to the disciples earlier that same evening that "the day is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are doing God a service". *So God's protection is not from death itself.* There is apparently something worse. To be lost.

Of course we have not always lived up to our high calling: if you think of the Crusades or the Inquisition, the God of Love has been proclaimed with the aid of a great deal of violence. "Crusader"

is still a term of abuse over much of the Middle East.....so starting a crusade didn't set off quite the vibes George Bush was hoping for.

So it's not as straightforward as we might hope: in fact I guess Jesus would not have prayed for his friends as lengthily as he did if he hadn't had a very human fear for them. We know that several of his inner circle would go on to meet gruesome deaths of their own.

But we also know in our own lives that we don't need to face something as apocalyptic as all-out persecution to wonder about how God keeps his promises. I have a dear friend – who gave me permission to tell you this – whose 23-year old son died suddenly and without warning just over six months ago. She has not lost her faith, and has been stunned by the continuous and generous outpouring of love towards both her son and the rest of the family....but she has lost a lot of "security", and of course so has the rest of the family. There are all the other losses as well, all the things that will now never happen ....grandchildren, the passing on of the family name. How did God keep her son safe? How do we face the things that happen to us? What is a faithful God actually promising us?

People have struggled with this since the idea for centuries. And if theologians haven't come up with an answer in two thousand years, we're not going to solve it this morning.

All of us I think have had the experience of not having prayer answered. At least we didn't think it was....and then perhaps looking back we can identify where something started to change: in us, or in the situation we're praying for. But I don't want to be glib about this – even Jesus felt himself abandoned, on the Cross. So he understands if we feel abandoned too – it's all right to feel that way. He also tells us to persist in prayer using the profoundly odd image of a corrupt, couldn't-care-less judge finally giving justice to a poor widow because it's frankly less bother than having to deal with her. What a strange way to talk about His loving Father!

So what do we do? I think we must acknowledge the truth of what we feel and experience; that pain doesn't hurt any less. We mustn't take it lightly or try to smooth it away (more than one person told my friend – to comfort her - that her son's death was "part of God's plan": she said to me, "What kind of God would do that?"). We pray, faithfully. And our reading in Acts also shows us what I like to think of as the "English" side of the early followers of the Way: they get on with it. In the aftermath of Judas's great betrayal, they .....appoint someone else. The first of many....as God continues to raise up new ones. It's not dramatic – duty almost never is – but that's our job: to get on with it. And to help each other get on with it.

Why? In John's letter we heard, "and this is the testimony – God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his son". Or as Paul says to the Corinthians, "If it is only for this life that we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied".

And if we ask "Where was God in Israel's genocidal conquest of Canaan? I think the answer has to be In the lost hopes, the extinguished future, of all the victims. Where he is now. This is the message of the Cross, which is lived out by our persecuted brothers and sisters, and in our own sorrows and tragedies. Where we reach our limits, Jesus says: Give it to me. I am strong enough. I have borne this for you and I will never leave you. And however often we walk away, he is always ready to say, "Welcome back". We are not lost.

As we end with a short period of silent contemplation, I invite you to consider the prayer for today in the nine days between Ascension and Pentecost. In this day, at this time, in this our world, we pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to equip us for the work God has given us.