

“What sort of a God...?”

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

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Exodus 14:19-31, Matthew 18:21-35

What sort of a God is this? What sort of a god is it who saves his people Israel from their slavery and oppression in the land of Egypt – which feels right and good and proper – but does so by killing every one of the Egyptian army, the chariot drivers, the horses, the troops, the officers, forcing them into a panic as the divided waters return and swamp them, and every single one of them drowned.

I can never read today's passage from Exodus without thinking of Charlton Heston as Moses, in the 1956 epic movie *The Ten Commandments*. With his chiselled jaw and his manly chest, standing on a headland above the sea, stretching out his hand as commanded by God and the waters rushing in and drowning the Egyptian pursuers. Thus were saved the fleeing people of Israel. But what sort of God is this?

This of course is a tribal god. It's a god who is on one group's side and against another. It's a god who is seen as protecting and saving one bunch at the expense of another. It's an ancient and rather primitive concept of God, a view that belongs thousands of years ago when people believed in a large pantheon of gods, always hoping that their god was stronger than others' gods, that their god would win their battles and struggles for them and they would come out on top.

Through the Bible, which traverses thousands of years of human development and reflection, we can trace several movements in the understanding of God. One movement is a growing monotheism, the realisation that there is only one God, and that this God is god of all, not just of humanity, not just of earth but the God of the whole universe, the whole of creation. It's a movement from tribal gods competing against one another, to the recognition by the prophets that the people of Israel have been chosen by the one true God and that their mission is to make this God known to all the nations. Then in the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus, God is firmly recognised as being God of all and God for all, for the whole of humankind.

Another movement through the Bible in the understanding of God amends the primitive idea that God wins wars, practises vengeance, destroys his enemies, wants an eye for an eye, to the right revealing of God as God of grace and love and peace, who wants wholeness of life for all, who wants us to love our enemies although preferably to regard no-one as an enemy, who offers us forgiveness and reconciliation with God through our simple receiving of his love in faith, and who wants us to live in peace and harmony with all.

These movements through the Bible in our understanding of God are not perfectly straight-line movements of course. In the New Testament we still find aspects of the old God coming through. The book of Revelation for instance, glories in the apocalyptic vision of God fighting his enemies the powers of evil, and causing the destruction of millions of Satan's followers. Even in today's amazing little parable, God is likened to the king or lord of the parable who hands over the unforgiving and the merciless to be tortured until they mend their ways – this contrasts vividly with Jesus' teaching of loving enemies, turning the other cheek, going the second mile, giving of oneself in service.

Did you notice in today's parable the gobsmacking discrepancy in the two debts presented to us? The first debt, forgiven by the king, is for 10,000 talents, where one talent is equal to

more than 15 years of normal wages, it's an astronomical debt. Yet it is forgiven. But the recipient of this extraordinary grace refuses then to forgive even a tiny debt which amounts to only 100 days of normal wages.

Forgiveness, grace, is at the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ. This is what God is like, wanting to give to us and to every human being acceptance, love, wholeness, reconciliation, abundant life here on earth and eternal life beyond this life, and asking of us that we receive these gifts in simple faith and that we then seek to live with similar grace and love in our lives towards others.

Narrowing our concept of God down to a tribal god is dangerous. Tragically, in our world there are people of faith who still conceive of God as ours and not theirs. Tragically, that has been part of the motivation of extremist Muslims such as those responsible for the 9-11 attacks on the United States and for myriad other terrorist attacks before and since. Tragically, there are some Christian extremists, whom I would want to disown as Christians mind you, who believe that God is for us and not for them, who seek vengeance, crusades, warfare, when we Christians are called to offer the other cheek, to love our enemies, to forgive.

There are Hindus and Jews and Shintos who want similarly to believe in a tribal god, when in fact God is one, God is the creator of all, the lover of all and the redeemer of all. Thankfully, the vast majority of people of faith, including most of those who believe in more than one god, take the view that their faith compels them and empowers them to live together in peace – as will be highlighted this afternoon at the interfaith Peace and Harmony gathering in the Healing garden over by the hospice.

What sort of a God do we follow? Not a tribal god, but the God of the universe, the God of Jesus Christ, the God of love, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace.

Hymn 648, written by my old friend Fred Kaan who died two years ago, speaks to us of God's acceptance of us and therefore of our acceptance in love of others, and of the importance of practising acceptance and forgiveness. It's a hymn which expresses the good news of Jesus Christ who came and taught and lived out the reality of the one true God who is God of all, who loves all, who wants us to accept his love and to live empowered by that love.

To the glory of God, Amen.