

March 8, 2009

The Blessing of Faith

Genesis 17.1-7, 15-15-16; Psalm 22.23-31; Romans 4. 13-25; Mark 8.31-38

In the land of Israel and of Palestine there is a war. Despite the current truce, people are being killed daily, and not only those who carry weapons. Non-combatants are losing their lives also: men, women, and children. Over these past decades since the creation of Israel as a modern state (and, some would say, over a thousand years before that) many thousands of families have been left to grieve for their loved ones in numbers that most of us would find unimaginable. I remember an interview with one of those Palestinian women who survived the 1983 massacre carried out by the "Christian Militia" in southern Lebanon, a massacre that was clearly engineered by Ariel Sharon as Israeli Defence minister. With eyes that, even 18 years later, had not done with crying, she described how the militias had entered the one-room house of her family at night. They shot her father and brother immediately, and while they were still alive but helpless, proceeded to rape her mother and herself. She was only 12 years old at the time. Then, after they had killed her mother also, the militias left.

It is these kinds of atrocities which fuel the resolve of the suicide bombers. For many there seems no better way to honour the dead than to take from the enemy 'an eye for an

eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life'. And let's not kid ourselves here. While the war between the Israeli military and Hamas is certainly political, and certainly ethnic, it is also, and most importantly, a religious war. It is very much a religious war: a struggle between two religious laws, the law of Moses and the law of Mohammed, each striving for supremacy over the other, each claiming the land for itself in the name of the God who gave it, and each doing so to the absolute exclusion of the other. The Israeli government has said, on many occasions, that there shall be no Palestinian state while the suicide bombings continue. Hamas, on the other hand, will accept nothing less than the total exclusion of Israel from the occupied territories and beyond. And they are willing to fight for that end with the only weapons they appear to have, the bodies of their young. How does one resolve such a deadlock? How does one break this cycle of retributive and summary justice, especially a justice that seems so deeply religious in its culture and derivation? A difficult question, a very difficult question! But one I believe to be essentially religious and theological in character. For whether the individual combatant and his or her superiors have a personal religious commitment or not, all of them speak

and think and act within a complex web of religious and theological meaning. Each of them act out their sense of vengeance and of justice within a language and code that is religious to the very core. So there will be no solution to this conflict without that solution being also a religious and theological solution.

Read in the context of this clash of two religious laws, each of them claiming an exclusionary legitimacy over the other, the letter of Paul to the Romans takes on an extraordinary poignancy. For Paul writes as a Jew who sees serious flaws in the use of religious law to make any such claims. Listen to what he says to his fellow Jews in chapter 2, verses 17-24:

If you call yourself a Jew and rely on the religious law and boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you not commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you not rob sacred places? You who boast in the law, do you not dishonour God by breaking the law?

And then again, in chapter 3 verses 28-30:

For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works

prescribed by the religious law. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not also the God of non-Jews? Yes, of non-Jews also, for God is one; and God will make righteous the Jew on the grounds of faith and the non-Jew too, through that same faith.

Can you hear what Paul is saying here? The difficulty with believing that one's own religious law is superior to another's, and therefore worth opposing to that other's by whatever means seem necessary, is simply this: that any religious law worthy of that name is impossible to keep. Its righteous demands are way beyond the capacity of even the most devoted of worshippers. Now, if that is so, then the promotion of that law as the highest law of God, the only law, the law to which all other codes must bow in submission, ends up in a profound and tragic irony. God is actually *dishonoured* by the ones who promulgate that law in his name. And so the law also condemns the very one who would keep it! So what is the law for, according to Paul? Not to save, he says, but to condemn. Not to exalt the one who believes in the law over those who do not, but to humble such a person to nothing beneath the impossible demands of divine justice. And doesn't this analysis describe the situation in Israel and Palestine so very well? The Jewish law condemns the Jews for their murder, and the Islamic law condemns the Muslims for theirs. And yet the war continues, because these respective laws are applied only and exclusively to the ones perceived as the enemy!

There is only one way beyond this tragic situation, says Paul. And that is

to relinquish all belief in the efficacy of one's religious law, whatever its contents, to establish your superiority over another. In fact, says Paul, no human being is able to claim superiority over another because all of us are justified, made righteous and whole, not by the works prescribed by the law, but by faith in the mercy of God to all, and for all. Now, this is where Paul makes a very interesting and clever move, a move that has the potential, even today, to dissolve the power of religious conflict. He invokes the story of Abraham: how God promised that he would be the father of many nations, and that his descendents would live in the land which we today call Israel or Palestine; how Abraham was made righteous and whole not by his obedience to a religious law, which has not yet been given, but by his faith in God's promise, even when such promises seemed no more than a foolish dream. And that is how it is for us too, says Paul, whether Jew or non-Jew. None of us are made righteous and whole by our obedience to a religious law, but rather by our faith in God's merciful promise.

Now this is really important stuff in the midst of the religious wars in the Middle East. For the three religious traditions which hold Jerusalem to be holy are also traditions which look to Abraham as the first witness to a God who is one. And Abraham, in a cycle of stories which all three traditions regard as authoritative, is one who is justified not by his obedience to the law-giving of Moses, or of Jesus, or of Mohammad, but by his faith in the merciful promise of God! Can you hear the hope in this proclamation? Can you see the potential there for demolishing the very ground which

justifies this war? If Abraham is our common father in faith, witnessing to the one God in whom we all believe, then cannot Jew and Christian and Muslim sit down at table together, not as enemies, but as siblings? If we are justified and made whole not, first of all, by our obedience to the law as we find it in our particular traditions, but by our faith in God's mercy, than can we not share, humbly, in the wonder of that gift together? And finally, if God promised Abraham that his descendents would live in the land and become a blessing to the whole world, can we not share, as daughters and sons of Abraham, in that inheritance? For the text of Genesis 17.7 is quite clear. The promise is for all Abraham's offspring, not for Jew alone, or Christian, or Muslim. It is for all Abraham's seed.

So, let me encourage all of you to prayer. Let us pray, with Jews and Muslims who share these convictions, that the stories of Abraham may be read and reread in the schools and markets of the holy land. And not only there, but in the parliaments and palaces of Iran, Iraq and Libya; in the White House and at 10 Downing Street; and in the homes of both Olmert & Haniyeh. Most of all, let us pray that the story of Abraham's faith may penetrate even into the training and education of soldiers, that they may learn the lesson at the heart of all our faiths: that *Shalom*, the within and between peace of God, comes only to those who are willing to die – not in conflict with one's enemy – but to the very idea of the enemy. Only by dying to the basic principles of this word, says Jesus, may we rise with him to the peace of the Father's kingdom.

Glory be to God—Father, Son and
Holy Spirit—as in the beginning, so
now and forever. Amen.

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2nd Sunday of Lent