

A text of terror – by Hilary Cotton – 29 July 2011

As a young girl I was entranced by the Old Testament stories of heroes – David and Goliath, Joseph and his coat of many colours, Joshua fighting the battle of Jericho. All of them Sunday School favourites and dealing with (it was conveyed) the idea that 'with God on your side everything will turn out ok'. I was less enamoured of Abraham taking Isaac to be (nearly) sacrificed, and Jacob stealing his brother's inheritance – but it was all glamorous adventurous stuff where the 'goodie' won in the end, thanks be to God.

It wasn't until my middle age that I twigged what an appalling example of moral living David was, and how gruesome a God is conveyed by the call to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (after all that waiting and the promise of a precious son....). Let alone to realise that the Canaanites in Jericho were people too – just not of the right sort for God? I suppose I am slow on the uptake, or just naive, in not having noticed all this before.

Since then I have approached the Old Testament with a lot more caution – mainly because I am a sensitive soul (I can't watch 'action' films because of all the violence and killing) and I can no longer read of acts of vengeance and retribution, let alone stories of torture or gratuitous ethnic cleansing, without serious revulsion.

More recently still I have come across stories that never make it into the lectionary and would certainly not feature in Junior Church – they are utter atrocities. There is the story of Jephthah, who, with Israel, was staring defeat in the face and pledged to God the sacrifice of 'the first living thing he met' if they won. They did – and the first thing he met was his daughter. So he sacrificed her (after granting her a two month stay of execution so that she could mourn her lost opportunity for bearing children). How come Abraham is let off sacrificing Isaac but God does not intervene here?

Then there is the woman in Judges 19. This period of Israel's history is pretty lawless and mean, so there are a number of horror-stories to choose from. Here is a woman (one of the 'no-name' series of women in the Bible) who returns to her father's home away from her husband – we know not why. Her husband (a Levite) goes to retrieve her, drinks with her father for 5 days, and then takes her away (there is no mention of any negotiation with her). So far so bad. On the way home they get themselves stranded, and accept hospitality from an old man in Benjaminite territory. In a repeat of the story of Lot earlier in the Bible, the bad men of the town demand that the Levite be sent out for them to sport with. The host offers them his young daughter and the wife of the Levite instead, but they refuse. In exasperation the Levite chucks his own wife out to them and they gang rape her; she crawls back to the house where she was staying and collapses on the doorstep. In the morning the Levite finds her unable to get up on his command, so throws her over his donkey and takes her home. At some point presumably she dies. He then cuts her into twelve pieces and sends a body-part to each of the twelve tribes of Israel, with a message that the tribe of Benjamin is responsible for the horror that was done to his wife, and what are they going to do about it. War ensues and on we go.

This kind of abuse of women – ranging from a simple failing to name them, using them as bargaining tools, failing to consider any views they might have, and violating them in despicable ways – is a theme throughout the Old Testament. Of course the customs of the day were different – women

were owned by their fathers or husbands or brothers and had few rights of their own. But it is interesting that writers chose to include such stories in the Bible. They wouldn't pass many 'parental guidance' tests, and yet they cannot be ignored or dismissed as too vile to even think about. Perhaps they point up the worst of our human failings – but they are not presented as that, they are presented as part of God's unfolding work through the ages – ie part of the plan.

My reading of the Bible is now tempered by reading such stories as these. I believe that God is good, and merciful, and loving, and makes good judgements – and is the same God in the Old and New Testaments. I cannot comprehend why these stories are included as part of the loving purposes of God. I shudder to think that these stories are read by Christians around the world, many in places where women continue to be treated as slaves, abused, killed and thrown away.

But then that is probably because my God is too small, not because She endorsed what happened to those made in her image in these pages.

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