Bible Reading: Nahum 1.2-6

A jealous and avenging God is the Lord,
the Lord is avenging and wrathful;
the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries
and rages against his enemies.
The Lord is slow to anger but great in power,  
and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty.  
His way is in whirlwind and storm, 
and the clouds are the dust of his feet.  
He rebukes the sea and makes it dry,  
and he dries up all the rivers;  
Bashan and Carmel wither,  
and the bloom of Lebanon fades.  
The mountains quake before him,  
and the hills melt;  
the earth heaves before him,  
the world and all who live in it.  
Who can stand before his indignation?  
Who can endure the heat of his anger?  
His wrath is poured out like fire,  
and by him the rocks are broken in pieces.

Three years ago, the service at which Justin Welby was enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury included a contemporary Christian song by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty. Nothing too surprising there – except that the particular song in question is one which many Christians find difficult to sing. Not technically. The tune, though perhaps not the finest, is not particularly demanding. No, the problem is the words, especially in the second half of verse 2:

In Christ alone! – who took on flesh,  
fullness of God in helpless babe.  
This gift of love and righteousness,  
scorned by the ones He came to save:  
till on that cross as Jesus died,  
the wrath of God was satisfied –  
for every sin on Him was laid;  
here in the death of Christ I live.

I was talking to someone about this last week and he told me that his church amends the reference to the wrath of God whenever they sing it – not “Till on that cross as Jesus died the wrath of God was satisfied” but something like
“Till on that cross as Jesus died the love of God was magnified”. Unsurprisingly perhaps, Stuart Townend and Keith Getty are on record as resisting proposals to amend their song in this way. ‘What I have written, I have written,’ so to speak...

I’m interested in issues that divide the Christian community, not least, of course, because of the theme of reconciliation which lies at the heart of our identity as a Cathedral. Bringing people together is what we’re here for! And so, when it comes to thinking about the wrath of God, I want to know why the different sides think in the way that they do. And to ask whether anything be done to help bring them together? How much of our understanding of the position of those with whom we disagree is based on the truth and how much relies on misleading caricature?

What, for example, do you make of this quotation from contemporary Christian author and pastor Rob Bell:

“...Some stories are better than others. Telling a story in which billions of people spend forever somewhere in the universe trapped in a black hole of endless torment and misery with no way out isn’t a very good story. Telling a story about a God who inflicts unrelenting punishment on people because they didn’t do or say or believe the correct things in a brief window of time called life isn’t a very good story... A gospel that repeatedly, narrowly affirms and bolsters the “in-ness” of one group at the expense of the “out-ness” of another group will not be true to the story that includes “all things and people in heaven and on earth.”

On the other side of the divide, we have someone like Arthur Pink, regarded as “one of the most influential evangelical authors in the second half of the twentieth century”:

“It is sad to find so many professing Christians who appear to regard the wrath of God as something for which they need to make an apology, or at least they wish there were no such thing. While some would not go so far as to openly admit that they consider it a blemish on the divine character, yet they are far from regarding it with delight, they like not to think about it, and they rarely hear it mentioned without a secret resentment rising up in their hearts against it. Even with those who are more sober in their judgment, not a few seem to imagine that there is a severity about the divine wrath which is too terrifying to form a theme for profitable contemplation. Others harbour the delusion that God’s wrath is not consistent with his goodness, and so seek to banish it from their thoughts. Yes, many there are who turn away from a vision of God’s wrath as though they were called to look upon some blotch in the divine character, or some blot upon the divine government.”

My impression is that many of us find the Rob Bell end of the spectrum more in line with our thinking and are rather uncomfortable with the approach taken by Arthur Pink. For the best of reasons, of course. After all, Christian faith demands that we believe enough impossible things as it is, without adding to them more than is necessary. We think about those whom we see walking past the West Screen and we yearn for them to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus. We want to make it as easy and straightforward as we can. We don’t want to put people off!

But perhaps this is a risk we need to take. So this is what I propose to reflect on together during these three evenings. I want to explore, as it were, the possibility of rehabilitating the wrath of God. I’m very happy, by the way, for there to be some gentle interaction between us. I have deliberately prepared each address only in outline so that I can take account of any feedback you may wish to offer, either in conversation immediately after the service or via email.

This evening we’ve begun to think about some of the questions raised by talk of the wrath of God. Tomorrow, my plan is to think about how God’s wrath might fit in alongside everything else we believe about him. And then on Wednesday, we’ll think about the relationship between the wrath of God and the cross of Jesus. Could we ever sing that song ‘In Christ alone’ as the authors would like us to – or should we abandon the offending verse altogether or at least change it to something more congenial?
As we reflect on these things together, I’m conscious that we all bring something to the table. All of us have inherited assumptions which, from time to time, it’s worth examining – perhaps especially during Holy Week. So how do we go about deciding what to believe as Christians? How do we balance out what can sometimes seem to be the contradictory claims of scripture, reason, tradition and experience? Which do we go with when they’re in conflict? Does the top spot go to what we find in the Bible? Or do we rely on what seems to us to make the most sense? Or do we depend on what has been passed down to us from previous generations of the church? Or is our confidence based more on what we have experienced for ourselves?

As we conclude this evening, I want, if I may, to echo – as much for myself as for anyone else! – what is probably Oliver Cromwell’s most famous quotation: “I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken.” I could be wrong in what I think I think about this. But then so could you. In our reflections together, let us pray for one another that we may seek and find more of the light of God’s truth.

2

Bible Reading: Matthew 22.1-14

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, “Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his slaves, “The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.” Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” For many are called, but few are chosen.’

The bishop and theologian Richard Hanson wrote this: “Most preachers and most composers of prayers today treat the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God very much as the Victorians treated sex. It is there, but it must never be alluded to because it is in an undefined way shameful. ...God is love; therefore we must not associate him with wrath. God is love; therefore he is indefinitely tolerant.”

This feeling that wrath is unworthy of God is nothing new. At the beginning of the fourth century, Lactantius recorded the opposition to the idea that was around in his day: “Many persons hold this opinion, which some philosophers also have maintained, that God is not subject to anger; since the divine nature is... altogether beneficent, and that it is inconsistent with his surpassing and excellent power to do injury to anyone...”

Back in the second century, Marcion had made a distinction between the wrathful God of justice revealed in the Old Testament and the merciful God of love revealed in those parts of the New Testament that remained after he had removed the passages which inconveniently suggested he was wrong! His more theologically-orthodox opponent Tertullian describes Marcion’s gospel somewhat ironically: “a better god has been discovered, one who is neither offended nor angry nor inflicts punishment, who has no fire warming up in hell, and no outer darkness wherein there is shuddering and gnashing of teeth: he is merely kind. Of course he forbids you to sin – but only in writing.”
Coming rather closer to our own time, the theologian Charles Dodd, in a brief but highly influential section of his commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Romans, suggests that anger is a human characteristic which it’s simply inappropriate to apply to God. For him, the wrath of God refers not to “the attitude of God to human beings” but “an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe.” He puts it like this: “In the long run we cannot think with full consistency of God in terms of the highest human ideals of personality and yet attribute to him the irrational passion of anger.”

But the fact that human anger is often irrational doesn’t mean that God’s anger has the same drawback. Is it not likely that there is a clear distinction between our way of being angry and God’s way of being angry? As the influential leader and writer John Stott puts it, God’s wrath against sin “does not mean... that he is likely to fly off the handle at the most trivial provocation, still less that he loses his temper for no apparent reason at all. For there is nothing capricious or arbitrary about the holy God. Nor is he ever irascible, malicious, spiteful or vindictive. His anger is neither mysterious nor irrational. It is never unpredictable but always predictable, because it is provoked by evil and by evil alone.”

We can go on to say that although real enough, God’s wrath is not intrinsic to him in the same way that love is. Whereas love is a fundamental and eternal attribute of God, his wrath is no more than an outworking of his character in response to sin. Wrath is not an attribute of God in the way that his love or holiness is. His wrath is his response to something outside of himself. This is reflected in the repeated affirmations in the Bible of God’s reluctance to exercise his wrath and his delight in showing mercy.

But this doesn’t mean that the wrath of God can be discounted. Far from it. Arthur Baird claims that “Wherever in the Old Testament one finds a reference to the love of God, his wrath is always in the background, either explicitly or implicitly, and we neglect this element to the impoverishment of the Hebrew concept of love.” The anger of God helps to underline his emphatically personal character.

When we reach the pages of the New Testament, Charles Dodd claims that in the teaching of Jesus “anger as an attitude of God to human beings disappears, and his love and mercy become all-embracing.” The wrath of God, he states, “does not appear in the teaching of Jesus, unless we press certain features of the parables in an illegitimate manner.” But others reach a rather different conclusion. In the New Testament teaching on judgment, and especially in the teaching of Jesus as found in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Arthur Baird finds the full Old Testament teaching with an emphasis on “God’s condemnation and wrath.” “The Synoptic Gospels record Jesus saying well over twice as much about the wrath of God as he ever did about his love.”

Why do they come to such different conclusions? A major difference is that Baird works from the whole sweep of Jesus’ teaching on judgment and wrath while Dodd appears to look solely at the use of the word ‘wrath’. But there are many passages where Jesus clearly expresses the divine hostility to all that is evil without using the actual term “wrath.”

As we draw towards a conclusion, here’s a challenging assertion from Richard Hanson: “The contemporary rejection by Christians of the biblical doctrine of the wrath of God is a typical example of our allowing secular, non-Christian ideas to creep into our understanding of the Christian faith in such a way as to distort it.”

Along similar lines, church leader and blogger Adrian Warnock makes this observation: “Objections to the wrath of God are totally grounded in a Western view of the goodness of humanity, and of the need for love and acceptance of everybody. We are not allowed in our culture to state what is right and wrong. This doesn’t allow true diversity. Heaven help the person who tells an aggressive secularist that they do believe there is a God and that there is such a thing as sin! It is very much in keeping with the spirit of this age to have a problem with the idea of judgement and the holiness of God but to rejoice in his love.”
But is God’s wrath really incompatible with his love? Many people think of them as simply opposed to one another. But the opposite of love is not wrath but indifference. The wrath of God is a consequence of his love, not the opposite of it. For, surely, a failure to hate evil points to a deficiency in love. The scholar Charles Cranfield illustrates this rather well. He asks whether God could rightly be seen as good and loving if he did not react to human evil with wrath. “For indignation against wickedness is surely an essential element of human goodness in a world in which moral evil is always present. Someone who knows, for example, about the injustice and cruelty of apartheid and is not angry at such wickedness cannot be a thoroughly good person; for their lack of wrath means a failure to care for their fellow human being, a failure to love.” He goes on to warn against building too much on the human analogy, for “even the very highest and purest human wrath can at the best afford but a distorted and twisted reflection of the wrath of God.” But the basic point, that lack of wrath against wickedness is a lack of caring which is a lack of love, is indisputable. “Absolute love implies absolute purity and absolute holiness: an intense burning light... Unless God detests sin and evil with great loathing, he cannot be a God of love.”

3

Bible Reading: Colossians 1.15-22

_He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him — provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven._

We began on Monday by venturing into territory that’s rather tricky and difficult to navigate – so much so that we hesitate to go there at all. The wrath of God is a highly emotive subject which opens up substantial chasms between people. Those on both sides are inclined to express themselves forcefully and can sometimes be less than gracious with those who come to different conclusions.

Yesterday we examined the possibility that although human anger is often impulsive and uncontrolled, God’s anger, because of the perfection of who he is, is free from any such drawbacks and is completely righteous at all times. And we explored the possibility that far from contradicting his love, God’s wrath is in fact essential for that love to be real. Were God not to respond with anger to evil then his love would be incomplete and flawed.

This evening we come back to the song with which we began on Monday. Even if we are able to acknowledge the wrath of God as something to include in the way we think about him, how can we sing ‘till on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied – for every sin on him was laid’? What sort of picture of God does this present to us? We tentatively and reverently put ourselves in his shoes for a moment and recoil with horror from the idea that we might require the death of our own child before being prepared to forgive people. The idea is grotesque and obscene. So why is it that so many otherwise sensible people seem to want to hold on to it?

A big part of the answer is that this is what the Bible seems to be telling us. From Paul in Romans 5.8: ‘...God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.’ From Peter in 1 Peter 3.18: ‘For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God...’ Again and again in the
New Testament we read that ‘Christ died for our sins’. 1 Corinthians 15.3: ‘For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...’ Revelation 1.5: ‘...To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood...’

But why? Why did God have to go to all this trouble? Why can’t he simply get on with it and forgive us? Why do there have to be all these barbaric complications? The so-called good news of what Christ has done for us by dying on our behalf makes no sense to the average person in the street. It’s bewildering. ‘If God is supposed to be so loving and powerful, why did Jesus have to die on the cross in order for him to be able to forgive us? After all, we’re always being told that we should forgive other people for the wrong they do to us. So why can’t God do the same?’

St Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury back in the 11th century, famously responded to this question by saying that ‘If anyone imagines that God can simply forgive us as we forgive others, that person has not yet considered the seriousness of sin.’ For Anselm, the issue is not so much ‘Why can’t God just forgive us?’ but rather ‘In the light of what sin is and who God is, how can he possibly forgive us at all?’ The argument is that even an omnipotent God can’t simply ignore the need for evil to be dealt with properly and fairly – any more than a judge can over-ride the just demands of the law by letting the guilty go off scot-free. For God to do so would undermine his holiness and compromise his justice. Unless...

In his spare time, one of the things the composer Hubert Parry used to do, in addition to coming up with such splendours as ‘Jerusalem’ and ‘I was glad’, was to sit as a magistrate. The story is told of how on one occasion he fined a poacher five shillings, and then nipped round to the back of the court and paid the man’s fine for him. We’re told that ‘that was Parry all over’ – liberal and humane. I wonder whether it helps to think of the cross saying something very similar about God. That’s God all over – liberal and humane. This way of looking at things says that the death of Jesus on the cross is God’s way of nipping round to the back of the court and paying our fine for us. Except that it’s rather more than five shillings, isn’t it? And so we need to ask – what is it about sin that’s so serious? Why does the apostle Paul feel the need to write that ‘the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord’? Why is the penalty so extreme?

Perhaps a further illustration might help a little...

Imagine an ardent republican, someone who finds the concept of being ruled over by a monarch distasteful to the point of being quite intolerable. We might note in passing, by the way, that this is not a bad way of defining what sin is – not so much the things we do which run counter to God’s will but more an attitude which rejects God’s right to be at the centre of our lives. Hence when asked ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’, Jesus echoes the Old Testament in his reply: ‘...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Anyway, back to our republican. Here he is, happily minding his own business, untroubled by what he would see as the impertinent intrusions of royalty, when, by some quirk of fate, he receives an invitation to a garden party at Buckingham Palace. What is he to do? Here’s an event which, for other people, would be a delight – but would, for him, be an afternoon of agony. Never mind just an afternoon – an eternity spent with a God whose blinding majesty we choose not to honour would be unbearable. This is what lies behind C S Lewis’s suggestion, towards the end of his book ‘The Pilgrim’s Regress’, that God deliberately created hell as a sort of black hole from which he, the otherwise omnipresent God of all, completely excludes himself. Hell, the death of eternal separation from God the source of all life, is his loving act of mercy for those who refuse to have him as their God.

In closing, let me return for a moment to the suggestion that the death of Jesus on the cross is God’s way of nipping round to the back of the court and paying our fine for us. That’s all very well – but whose pocket is the five shillings
coming out of? One of the most famous texts in the Bible proclaims that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’

Alright – but the thing that doesn’t immediately make sense is that if it is God who is loving the world, why did he send his Son? Why send someone else to do the dirtiest work imaginable for you?

In my previous parish, the Family Service on Easter Day was enlivened one year by the arrival of some special guests. Things were proceeding conventionally enough when there was a commotion at the back as three figures, dressed impressively and memorably as the wise men from the Christmas story, made their way into church. They came up to the front singing ‘We three kings from orient are’, apologising for being late and blaming the sat-nav.

We were being encouraged in a not very subtle but nonetheless effective way to remember the crucial connection that exists between Holy Week and Easter on the one hand and Christmas and Epiphany on the other. That the baby in the manger who grew up to become the man on the cross is none other than God himself, clothed in human flesh. And that our way of being parents and children is but a pale reflection of the closeness, the depth and intimacy of the Father-Son relationship experienced by God. To the point where his sending of his Son into the world was the sending of himself to absorb the poison, suffer the pain and defeat the power of evil. John Clark and Marcus Johnson put it like this: “The fact that Christ is identical in essence with the Father means that the Father’s sending of the Son is nothing less, different, or other than the self-giving of God as God has forever been in himself.” Seeing the death of Christ on the cross as a picture of a vengeful God taking it out on an innocent third party couldn’t be further from the truth. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’. This is what helps us, as we contemplate the wonder of the cross of Jesus, to hold together both the love of God and the wrath of God.

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