

A Sermon in King's College Chapel

Against Revenge

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. These words from Paul's letter to the Romans could not be clearer: do not take revenge. And yet no biblical injunction has been more flagrantly ignored.

Earlier this month I was able to make my first ever visit to Israel and Palestine - the 'Holy Land'. I am delighted that I took the rather last-minute opportunity, and only regret not having gone many years previously. I have so many vivid memories - from the huge Christmas trees in Bethlehem and Nazareth, to the miracle wedding wine store in Cana, to a boat trip on the sea of Galilee, to walking the Via Dolorosa through the Islamic market stalls of Jerusalem, to the relentless liturgical competition of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

I was travelling with a group of Anglo-Catholics from the Pacific North West. It was a pilgrimage, and we had short services consisting of a reading, a hymn and a prayer at several places each day, and most days arranged to have a service of Holy Communion at a place of special significance. And while everyone wanted to enjoy having fun together, I felt that there was a serious pilgrimage intention in each person present; that all were open and expectant with regard to gaining insights or deepening their faith or spirituality.

Travelling brings its own challenges, and so does meeting new people. Both can make us more spiritually alert - and that's not a bad start. The pressures of everyday life, even in a supercharged place like this, can dull our spiritual sensitivity and narrow our focus so that the real meaning and the greater implications of what is said and done are lost as we rush on to the next piece of music or sermon or prayer, the next meeting or

supervision, the next administrative problem to solve or human predicament to seek to understand.

There are plenty of people who believe that such unreflective rushing is fine because there really is no more to life than what you see and do: that human life and human history simply are one damn thing after the other, a series of dots that do not join into a pattern that has more meaning than the isolated dots themselves. But that's clearly not the only way to approach life. Nor is it without its problems. If a person chooses to believe that there is no ultimate purpose in life then they should not be too surprised to find, when the thrill wears off, that it *feels* that life has no ultimate purpose. That's not a great feeling.

Nor is it a great feeling when a person has a clear understanding of the purpose of all that it is, crowned by a careful and intricate understanding of the one true God who stands at the apex of their own pyramid of meaning, only to find that life isn't actually working out as it would if this faith were entirely and exclusively true.

I am speaking here of the conundrum of monotheistic faiths, in particular Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of which have coherent and comprehensive theologies; all of which make life meaningful and worthwhile and secure for millions of people; all of which give rise to art and charity and life and friendship and culture, but not one of which can really make sense of the persistent and successful existence of the other two.

This is an issue that is more than ever evident in the Holy Land in general, and Jerusalem, the Holy City, in particular. It's both inevitable and ironic that the holiest place on earth is also the most contested and conflicted place on earth. The achingly beautiful mosque, the Dome of the Rock on

the Temple Mound is one symbol religious one-up-man-ship. The memory of the Crusaders is another. And what are we to make of the huge wire-topped walls that divide this Holy Land into sections? No wonder we should continue to pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Today is Holocaust Memorial Day - the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. That appalling ethical defacement of the western world cannot and should not be forgotten. When I visited Poland a decade or so ago I spent a day there. As well as people, like me, taking a sombre day out from more relaxed holiday activities, there were dozens of young Israeli soldiers, all of whom are sent to that dreadful place to learn and to feel something relevant to their own lives. Look what they did to us when we let our guard down!

The presence of many armed young people on the streets of Jerusalem is one of my abiding memories of my more recent visit. It made me wonder how I would feel if we armed say, twenty five per cent of the students of Cambridge, just to make sure that we were always safe.

I began this sermon with Paul's point about the need not to take revenge. The truth of the matter is that religious people of all faiths, and dogmatic people of no faith, often see revenge as the most obvious, natural and just thing to do.

And yet if we listen to our most senior and wise religious guides they will direct us to take a different path. Paul again,

Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all.

Of course it's not as easy as it sounds. It might be easy enough to live peaceably with nice people, but the challenge comes when people are

being difficult, obdurate, unfair threatening, or hostile towards us. The real challenge to peaceable-ness is when we have been hurt.

Might the challenge to be peaceable become a bit easier if we remember that almost always the person who harms us has been harmed in the past? That almost every act of dogmatism and hostility has its root in some kind of wounding experience and disturbing memory? Empathy may not solve all the world's problems, but lack of empathy certainly loads the dice against the possibility of peace.

I sometimes think that revenge would be fine if it worked. The tragedy of the vengeful person is that they act on the belief that revenge will bring closure and justice. But it never has, and it never will. It just makes matters worse. Revenge leads to revenge which leads to revenge. Revenge is a car with an accelerator but no break pedal and a disconnected steering wheel. To put it another way, payback always comes with interest.

This seems to be a terribly difficult lesson for people to learn - especially in some of the more pressurized places on the planet, where cycles of revenge have dominated history and memory and motivation. All the more reason, then, for those of us fortunate enough to be here to take this particular message from St Paul to heart and to seek to build it into our daily habits of thought and mind: *never avenge yourselves ... in so far as it is possible, live peaceably with all*. Only if we are prepared to do that will our prayers for peace be offered with integrity; only if we do that will we give peace a chance.

*The Revd Dr Stephen Cherry
Dean, King's College, Cambridge
Romans 12.16-end; Matthew 8.1-13*