

What do you expect to see when you open up your Bible? Yes I know that sentence presupposes a lot but, pretend just for me that you spend your evenings strengthening your soul with the Scriptures, and this is after all only a thought experiment so, what do you expect to read in there?

Words of wisdom? Hymns of praise? Tales of Jesus meek and mild and shepherds and angels and wise men and stars leading to a stable? Guidance for life? An occasional trip into the mystical side? Predictions of the future, sometimes scary, but happy ever after in the end?

Well, a bit.

Maybe.

If you've advanced your devotional reading from the Ladybird Little Lord Jesus to the full Illustrated Children's Bible then you also might be expecting to read about some people meeting unpleasantly sticky ends using nothing more intricate than smooth pebbles from the wadi, the jawbone of an ass or a tent peg. If you've perused the pages a while you'll know some of the Good Book is definitely PG.

Last week's sermon featured a quick romp through Genesis. You may remember if you've had a diary disfunction and have come to church two Sundays in a row (I know most of you do, only teasing). A reminder; there was disobedience, punishment, betrayal, cheating, murder, mass murder, mass circumcision followed by more mass murder. What's amazing about that is... after that first book in the Bible, it gets worse. Genesis is an eye opener, but you need a strong constitution in order to keep hold of the contents of your stomach if you go on to read Joshua. A strong stomach and a seven day fast so there's nothing to bring up if you intend to turn the page and read Judges. The good book is replete with tales to turn the head and upset the stomach there's gore aplenty, from butchery- practical and cultic, of animals and human to murder; there's malice, mayhem and misogyny. All that seems to be missing is morality. Those of us expecting a God is Love perspective or to see the patriarchs riding the social justice camel can find the Bible going difficult. There's a lot there which would make you change channels, close your eyes and cover your ears.

For my money one of the most disturbing tales is not from the murky margins of prehistory but story we heard a part of today in our Old Testament reading. This is a tale taken, apparently, from the Court Records of the Israelite Kingdom , so a time

when God's wandering nomads have become a civilisation. But... Eleanor of Aquitaine chivalry it ain't. In terms of pure gore there's not too much to shock here, at least compared to its scriptural siblings. There's no high body count in this tale; no graphic description of carnage, no once seen never forgotten orgy of spilled viscera. It's worse than that. What we're given to contemplate in indelible printer's ink is a vision of a world without a moral compass: not a physical atrocity but a *moral* one. So gruelling is it the full tale doesn't make it into the Sunday Lectionary: you'll never hear it read from this eagle Lectern.

In case, when **N** was reading a few minutes ago you were busy thinking about lunch or what the person three pews in front was wearing or whether the colour of Alison's scarf is cerulean or something less iconic, let's summarise the tale, the parts we heard today, and the parts we didn't.

One day there being nothing on the box King David got up off his couch and went for a stroll on his roof, as you do. There he saw a woman, on her roof, having a bath, as you do. David went all, erm, clammy inside and invited the woman to come over to look at his etchings. Some weeks later it turns out that Bathsheba- such is her name- is pregnant. She's also married, to Uriah. Awkward. Uriah is in David's army away on campaign so David orders him to return from the battlefield in the hope that he'll spend some quality time with his wife and assume that the upcoming happy event is his doing. Unfortunately for David (and so it turns out for Uriah) Uriah is pious and the Torah forbids warriors from enjoying themselves with women so he stays outside. Cunning plan frustrated, David falls back on Plan B, which is, effectively, having Uriah murdered.

So much we have already heard, albeit in a different translation.

However, the tale continues and the humour evaporates. The baby arrives. To punish David for adultery and murder, God makes the baby ill. David puts on sackcloth and fasts and prays and begs God to spare the child. He doesn't, and the child dies. So David gets up from his grovelling and goes to show Bathsheba his watercolour sketches and the result is a boy called Solomon.

This is not a tale you want to read in the Bible. It doesn't even work as a cautionary tale, like Sodom and Gomorrah or Adam and Eve, do bad things, get punished, Yes, God does punish the transgressors: by killing a baby. And then David and Bathsheba

reap the rewards for their next son, who becomes King, whisper it, but greater even than his father, the greatest of Israel's kings.

I've made the tale farcical in the retelling, but that's mostly because unadorned with embarrassed humour it's too grim. Emotionally, the story is blow after blow, if you're not punch drunk at the end, you've probably not been listening. It's one shock after another, a real shockathon.

Shocking. But not surprising. The only part of this behaviour that is really surprising, truly mind-boggling, is what God does. Reprehensible as it is, nothing of what David does is really surprising, it's not beyond our imaginings. People commit adultery, then try to cover it up. People commit murder to get rid of a rival. They become anguished when a child is ill. They get over it when it dies. It's not quite an everyday tale of country folk, but nobody's really surprised. However, this is sacred scripture. What is on display here is supposed to be a different humanity, surely? The better angels of our nature.

Not today. Instead, a gruesome tale of betrayal, adultery and murder. There's no happy ending and no moral at the end to teach us how to be good.

But.

It's in the Bible, our sacred scripture so we shouldn't, couldn't just ignore it, close our eyes to what we'd rather not see. What then can we, 21st century Christians, take from this most challenging of Bible stories?

Well, this morning two things I'd like to suggest.

First, actions have consequences. And we are incredibly bad at knowing what action leads to what consequence and what consequence has been caused by what action. So we might ascribe the death of a newborn baby to God's punishment of his father, but this is at best unprovable and, given everything else we know about God, wrong. Providence— God's action in the world— is real, but to us unknowable. We know God's will is at work in the world but we cannot know how, when or what-in-particular. Yes, as Einstein quipped, God does not play dice. But (as Fenby added) he does have the best poker face in the business. Everything happens for a reason but we do not know those reasons. Anyone who claims they know that something has occurred because of God's intervention— usually it's punishing but sometimes

blessing— whoever makes such claims is, at best deluded and at worst twisting God to fit their own agenda. God did not divert a bullet aimed at Donald Trump into one of his supporters. The scriptures, special though they may be, are not immune from this mistaken thinking. Written by humans, they are by necessity riddled with errors, prejudices, echo chambers, confirmation bias and special pleading. Yes, God can speak into our lives and more especially into our souls; we can feel pretty confident sometimes that a vocation, say, or an act of compassion or mercy might have been prompted by providence; but we should avoid the temptation to think that God has caused us to fall out with our partner or given us rheumatic fever or helped us get a pay rise or a promotion. Unless that promotion is to Pope, and then he probably did have a hand in punishing that person. So, first, we cannot predict providence.

Second: nothing we do will make God give up on us. No matter how horrible we are. No matter how weak or inhuman. No matter how much we let him down or ignore what he wants or offend or outrage him. Look at this sorry tale of adultery and murder, callousness and exploitation. By human standards, by religious standards, by ethical standards truly shocking. And still... The gospels labour religiously so to speak to put Jesus in the direct line of the chief protagonist of this debauchery, Christ Son of David. Nothing we do will make God give up on us. So it has been from the beginning, when Adam disobeyed God's direct command; when Cain killed his brother Abel, when Jacob's sons sold their younger brother into slavery, when his chosen people again and again and again turned their back on their God, he did not give up on them.

It is unlikely any of us will travel quite the same path as King David in his depravity; we will each wander from the narrow path in our own particular manner, lost in our own unique way. But we must not forget that however foolish, selfish or uncaring we are; however cruel, hurtful or sinful we become; God's providence will be there unseen, unknown and unknowable, searching us out. We will all wander from the path, and we will all— powerful or powerless; king or concubine; ruler, subject or citizen— we will all be carried in the arms of the Good Shepherd back to the fold.