

violence in religion

a sermon preached on the
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st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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The Lectings: Exodus 14:19-31, Romans 14:1-14, Matthew 18:21-35

Very little effort or time is needed in order to get the essential drift of today's gospel. Seventy times seven – the number in fact expressed in the Greek text – is sufficiently large a number to shatter conventional record-keeping. In effect, the Divine Lover forgives infinitely – and calls upon all divine daughters and sons to do likewise. No special qualifications required – anyone can get the point.

But just in case the hearer was dozing, in the parable given to illustrate the point the scale is escalated – almost beyond comprehension. The debt which the King forgives is 'ten thousand talents' – which being 50 million denarii, means about 50 million days' wages. So a person would have to work 137,000 years, 365 days every year, in order to pay the full amount! Jesus uses poke-in-the-eye Middle Eastern hyperbolae – he's having a bit of fun at his listeners' expense.

Clearly, there's no great intelligence required to get the shocking comparison – that the person who has been forgiven this impossibly large sum then refuses to cancel a relatively paltry sum, a mere one hundred days wages. The fellow servants get the point immediately.¹

So, there's little more to be said. Forgive, with an abundance beyond comprehension – that's the nature of the King, the nature of God, and, therefore it's be the way for the children of God.

Well there would be nothing more to say, except for the land mine in the last two verses: "And in his anger [the unforgiving servant's] lord *handed him over to be tortured* until he would pay his entire debt. So *my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you*, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."² We can hardly fail to notice the shocking cruelty and violence here. Not to mention the sheer thuggish stupidity of this outburst – no one who is locked up in a prison can pay a debt, even if they were locked up for 137,000 years!

I consulted nine commentaries on Matthew's gospel regarding these two verses. They fall into three categories in their treatment of these two verses. One group maintains a sheepish (perhaps embarrassed?) silence – pretending the shocking violence is not there. Another group waffles on with rationalisations, attempting to take the harsh edge off – having already asserted that the King in the parable is an image of the divine Father, then in the last two verses unconvincingly trying to make the opposite case. The third group takes the violence by both hands and comes out straight shooting – God *will* act violently towards those who do not forgive from the heart. One commentary presumed to be of respectable biblical scholarship sums it up: "The master's anger represents divine wrath directed against false disciples"³. The third group is perhaps to be applauded for at least being more honest by not fudging – divine wrath is embraced, and welcomed as necessary in the divine economy.

But blessing such an interpretation has had far-reaching destructive consequences in Christian history. It is no use pretending this does not matter, or is no longer relevant. When the King of the parable is identified as a symbol of God – and when this King-Father-God uses such violent methods to get his children into line – this inevitably makes for a violent religion. What are we to make of the Lord's deliberate slaughter of the unnumbered thousands of Egyptians in today's Hebrew Scripture? All the great Christian doctrines are inevitably polluted and corrupted by this violence. Mercy ends up being ultimately conditional. Love only given under threat of eternal torture. Obedience demanded with a gun at the head – and the whiff of eternal hell fires. Christ's atoning action becomes the workings of a lethal Father-God subject to outbreaks of rage – 'salvation' accomplished by God killing his Son because of your sin and mine.

¹ Matthew 18:31

² Matthew 19:34-35

³ Robert H Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* (2nd ed.), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, p375.

Tragically, commentators who bless divine wrath tend to identify themselves as ‘evangelical’. Anyone watching current world events can hardly fail to notice the chilling similarity between this attitude and that of violent Islamists. Apparently it’s only Christians who are unable to see this all-too-obvious fact.

Christianity remains under the shadow of this somewhat psychotic Father-God-King – who proclaims infinite forgiveness and grace in one breath, but breathes wrathful fire and lethal destruction in the next. We can waffle on all we like about ‘mission’ and ‘evangelism’ – but unless we come to grips with Christianity’s wrathful and at-times psychotic Father-King-God we are destined for irrelevance, and we are likely to continue to silently bless the ultimately destructive activities of scalp-hunting proselytising ‘Christian’ mission agencies – some of them in our name as Anglicans. Perhaps as never before has it been so crucial for Christianity to face up to the lethally violent streak in its King-Father-God – and the destructive consequences of that in Christian missionary activity, fervently rooting out ‘false disciples’. Tragically, thus far the churches fudge this matter – we are yet to be honest. We continue to project our own lethally-violent Father-God onto the Muslim God, and Muslims.

But the way forward is there in what is truly the **εὐαγγέλιον** *evangellion* of Christ. The solution is to be found in undergoing the Christ way: that is, dying to oneself. Those who are baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ ought not be surprised by this – of course the solution is to be found in dying!

This means that our image of the Father-King-God must die. That is, he must die to his identity as wrathful. Unless we accept that Jesus taught that his Father was a psychotic torturer – and I do not accept this – then the only life-giving approach to the last two verses of today’s parable is the conclusion that Jesus *wants his hearers to be deeply shocked* by the forgiving King’s sudden regression to violent behaviour. Perhaps we are meant to be shocked enough to wake up to the lethal image of the Father-King-God we have been harbouring in our own hearts – the God we want to beat up our enemies and make everyone like us.

The Father-King-God needs to die in us as it did in him. This will involve not only the secret, unconscious violence of our hearts – but, communally, it requires a searching honesty and reform of our hymns and prayers and our missionary activity. We should never confuse proselytising with the **εὐαγγέλιον** *evangellion* of Christ. For, (as we heard last Sunday), “whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven; and whatever you abolish on earth will be abolished in heaven”.⁴ And, “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave”.⁵ And, “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it”.⁶ And those who hold to a wrathful Father-King-God may well get exactly that. And those whose wrathful Father-King-God has died in them will have died themselves to all wrath and violence – and experience the miracle of forgiveness of the heart.

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⁴ Matthew 16:19, 18:18

⁵ Matthew 20:26-27

⁶ Matthew 16:25