

A DIFFERENT GOD? (Lindfield 28th July 2019)

EKEKIEL 33:1-11, JAMES 1: 13-18, MATTHEW 7: 15-27

The question is often asked, “Why does God seem different in the Old Testament than he does in the New Testament?” or “Why does God order the slaughter of nations in the Old Testament but has Jesus speak of love and acceptance in the New?” I want to assert at the beginning that I don’t believe God is any different at all. I believe God is being perfectly consistent but the contexts in the two eras when Old and New Testaments were written are so different these so-called differences seem real.

In the Old Testament God is forming a nation for Himself. Israel is to be a special nation – a theocracy – ruled by God. One God, in itself an entirely unique concept in the ancient near-east, would rule the nation and by its very existence it will be a witness to the world. The world will see God’s rule and come to know and believe in this same God as a result.

To form a nation one needs all sorts of structures and ways of doing things and people with authority to oversee and to punish those who want to go their own way. The books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are largely about these things. God is also concerned with individual behaviour so, through Moses, he gives the 10 Commandments as the basis for personal endeavour.

To form this land the current inhabitants had to either convert to God’s ways or leave. The Canaanites would do neither. What was God to do? Before we look at the answer to that let us be reminded that the Old Testament is about God’s dealing with Israel. But God is sovereign over ALL. God is dealing with all the other nations as well as Israel but we only get glimpses of what God is doing with these nations when they impact on Israel. God wanted Canaan to repent and to join in this incredible endeavour of forming a nation which would be a witness to the world. Indeed God told Abraham, “*Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is*

theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years....And then they shall come back here in the fourth generation for the iniquity of the Amorites and Canaanites is not yet complete.” (Gen. 15: 13, 16).

God is giving the Canaanites four hundred years to come to God but they do not so when the time is right God’s judgement falls on them by having them killed as the people who will become Israelites take possession of the land. He gave them 400 years. That is not all.

God signals his intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah “for their wickedness” but Abraham doesn’t want them destroyed lest good people are also destroyed. So he bargains with God, if there are 50 righteous people will you destroy it? What about 45? 40? 10? God would spare the cities if there were 10 righteous people but there weren’t. There was only Lot.

Similarly, Nineveh was a great city. It too has come under the judgement of God but God sends the prophet Jonah to preach and give them one last chance to repent and they do, even the King and we read that God changes his mind and saves the city. God shows great compassion as well as needing to deal with nations.

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Back in Canaan while the order is to slaughter everyone it is clear that does happen. Last week we saw Jesus speaking with a Canaanite woman. Presumably some survived right up to the time of Jesus. Did they continue to live there and inter-marry with Israelites or did they go to another land and then return generations later? We will never know but I suspect the former was most likely.

When we turn one page in our Bibles from the end of Malachi to the beginning of Matthew we have passed over another 400 years of history. Described in the Bible in the Books of the Apocrypha. It is the period of the Maccabees.

With the coming of Jesus and the New Covenant (or New Testament) things change dramatically. The people of God are no longer one Nation, one culture, one set of civil laws. The people of God now transcend nationality, culture and geographical boundaries. The people of God now consist of believers from anywhere and everywhere. There is no longer any need for religious laws or ceremonies, or for national laws like food laws or ceremonial washings or all the regulations around the synagogue and Temple. Obedience to the Law is subsumed to the motives and attitudes of mind and heart. All the commandments are summarised down to two: Love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself". The Ten Commandments and all the Laws in the first 5 Books of the Bible are tied together and re-packaged in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus even told the disciples to "rend to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's". This is the first rendition of the Separation of Church and State.

The People of God is now the Church. Not a denomination (they are man-made institutions) but the real Church, the body of believers, what is often called "the one Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church." The Church is to be the witness of God's grace to the world. The church is to be the magnet that draws people to God.

God does not deal with the Church the way He once dealt with Israel as it's no longer appropriate to do so. It's not a different God but an entirely different context. The responsibility is ours as God's people today – here and now. Our task is a mighty one. Our task is nothing less that to represent God to the world. To be "Ambassadors for Christ" as St. Paul describes it. God has not changed but the way He works has. It is no longer the task of the nation to be His people, rather it is our task. It's a hard task but a glorious one and we have the promised help of the Holy Spirit. So let us understand what is ahead of us and go forward faithfully, enthusiastically remembering that we are about God's work, God's mission because if we don't do it, who will? AMEN.
