

Innocent Victims in the Word

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, January 17th, 2010

When we read some of the stories in the Word about the deaths of innocent people we are clearly meant to feel a sense of outrage not only at the loss of life but especially at the violence done to justice itself. For instance, when we read how the Pharaoh in Egypt ordered all the male Hebrew babies killed to avoid the danger of an insurrection when they grew up, we immediately recognize him – Pharaoh – as the evil tyrant to be overcome. It is the same when we read in the New Testament about the treacherous King Herod ordering the slaughter of all innocent children in Bethlehem, aged 2 and younger, in a vain attempt to be sure the baby Jesus also was killed. In these stories, and others like them, it is clear that the suffering and death of innocent victims goes against every rule and principle of the loving God, and that no right-minded person, least of all God Himself, would ever condone such a thing.

What we sometimes fail to remember is that the very same revelation in which we read these stories also tells about a number of times when God did punish the innocent, including children too young to be held responsible for their actions, and women who evidently had nothing to do with the offense for which the punishment was given. We saw a classic example in our first lesson this morning where we read that

“...the children of Israel committed a trespass regarding the accursed things, for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed things; so the anger of the Lord burned against the children of Israel.... (So) then Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan, the son of Zerah, the silver, the garment, the wedge of gold, his sons, his daughters, his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent, and all that he had, and ... (they) stoned him with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones.”
(Joshua 7:1, 24, 25)

Besides this there are many stories of war in the Word in which the tribes of Israel were commanded by God to destroy whole populations including men, women and children, and even the cattle of their enemies, although these had done nothing to harm or even threaten them.

All this of course is very disturbing to the rational, compassionate mind, and the situation is not helped by the vengeful tone of verses like these in Psalm 137 where we read,

“O daughter of Babylon, who is to be destroyed,
Happy shall he be who repays you as you have served us!
Happy shall he be who takes and dashes
Your little ones against the rock.”

Many people claim to have lost their faith in the Bible as a true revelation or guide for their lives on account of just such passages.

But it is important to know that there are good reasons for every one of these incidents and statements. Not only do the literal stories make sense in the context of their own time and cul-

ture but, most importantly, we know that in every one of them there is a hidden spiritual meaning that relates to the personal life of everyone living in any age or culture. It is this meaning that has the power to affect us most directly, and it is this we are most interested in today.

First of all, in our lesson from Joshua, why does it say that the children of Israel committed a trespass against the Lord when in reality it was just ONE of the children of Israel? Why did the Lord allow them to suffer in battle and lose the lives of thirty-six men who had nothing to do with this offense? Did He hold all the tribes responsible for what one man out of one household out of one tribe did? Again, why did Achan's punishment extend to his children, and why did all of his animals and other possessions have to be destroyed? This hardly seems fair, and, in the end it even contradicts other teachings in the Word, such as that of Ezekiel where we read that children will not be punished for the sins of their fathers, but that everyone will be judged according to his own ways (Ezekiel 18 and 33).

The answer in the literal sense is that in this case the children of Israel had been thoroughly instructed (Deut. 20:16-17) never to take the spoils of war from any city of Canaan, and they had been warned specifically (Joshua 6:18) as a body, just before the battle, not to touch any of the spoils of Jericho, their first conquest, lest they bring a curse on the whole camp. So they all shared the responsibility to help one another avoid temptations and obey. Also, they all knew the dire consequences to their families if they disobeyed.

Really, we are not so different today. We are all in this life together, and we do share tremendous responsibilities to help one another. And in this time of political, social and environmental consciousness we are also well aware of the consequences to future generations if we cannot work together in these natural, worldly matters. How much more responsibility do we have then in spiritual matters?

Now it may have been possible for Achan to have stolen some of the spoils without anyone seeing him, but more likely his children shared his secret, so they shared in his guilt. As for his possessions, it would not have been right to let anyone else have them for they had all been warned of the curse if anyone disobeyed. So even his animals, his tent and all his things had to be destroyed, just as guns and drugs are destroyed when found among criminals today.

Another factor in this story is that, unlike today, in that culture women and children were, frankly, thought of as possessions. They were entirely dependent on the man as head of the household and were actually status symbols for him, signs of wealth and prosperity and blessing from the Lord. Under these conditions it was perfectly logical to the Jews that a curse against any man should include his whole family. Now we know this isn't right. But we still have to accept the fact that the Word of the Old Testament was adapted to the states of primitive people who thought this way and who could not have accepted any revelation otherwise. For them it was right, or at least it seemed right. The remarkable thing is that in spite of this necessary accommodation - this adaptation to their states - the Lord was able to convey deeper truths about spiritual life through the symbolism – as we say, the “correspondences” – of an otherwise terrible story.

The fact is that all members of any household in the Word of God, including the husband or father, wife or mother, sons, daughters, menservants, maidservants, hired help and so on, all

represent various aspects of the spiritual life of a single individual. In the Divine allegory of the Scriptures they all constitute parts or elements of one person - you or me.

The “father” is the love within ourselves that inspires everything. It may be good or evil depending on the context but it is the source, the origin, the procreator, of many other states that arise in our hearts and minds, not to mention the deeds we do. The “mother” is the wisdom that nurtures and supports both the love itself and the young new thoughts and affections that result from her union and co-operation with the “father.” “Sons” are the truths, or thoughts about the truth, that are so conceived, “daughters” are the affections that are generated, and “servants” are the natural knowledges and feelings that minister to the deeper things which are the ruling loves and leading principles by which we live. The expression, “the wish is father to the thought” comes from Shakespeare, but before Shakespeare ever was a gleam in his father’s eye this concept was rooted in the basic symbolism of Divine Revelation everywhere, that is, in the correspondence of everything in nature with something in the spiritual world, for in the end the whole natural world is nothing but a huge theatre representative of spiritual things (AC 3483, etc.).

You will remember from the second lesson that the Lord said He did not come to bring peace on earth, but that He would “set a man *against* his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. “And,” He said, “a man’s foes will be those of his own household” (Matthew 10:35-36). True, we may have family arguments, but anyone who has ever had self-doubts or fears or tough decisions to make will understand that the greatest foes we will ever face are the ones within the household of our own minds, within the family of our conflicting thoughts and feelings. And, critically, anyone who loves his own ideas more than the Lord’s can never be worthy of the Lord, for he will never accept His leadership.

Even the cattle and sheep of primitive pastoral life represent various attitudes and dispositions we possess on the natural plane of our lives – attitudes and dispositions we still recognize in common expressions such as when we call someone a “lamb,” a “goat,” a “bull,” a “snake in the grass,” a “fox,” a “dove,” a “hawk,” a “lion,” and so on.

Therefore when the Lord teaches that we must be prepared to LEAVE father and mother, and indeed “sell all that (we) have” to follow Him, we understand that we must be prepared to give up all of our selfish predispositions and worldly ambitions in favour of higher, better things from Him. We must be prepared to let the whole family, the whole system of such attitudes in our minds be replaced by a new hierarchy, a new household of spiritual loves from the Lord.

Now in the case of characters throughout the Word specifically labelled as sinners or as enemies of Israel, it should be easy to see that their families or their children represent all the related loves and ideas that stand in the way of spiritual life. Older family members are the hereditary loves and traditional ideas that form the basis of our selfish and worldly decisions. Younger ones are the new thoughts, feelings and habits just getting established and starting to grow in harmony with the others. As we begin to mature in spiritual life we recognize that we need to cut off or leave behind the old selfishness and misunderstandings that characterize our first life and interfere with our progress, but the tender young thoughts and feelings that were their offspring don’t seem so sinister. In fact, like little children they seem quite harmless and we are very tempted even to nurture them. A little white lie now and then? – no big deal. A small moral indiscretion?

– why worry?! Some honest coveting now and then? – who cares? Such is our disposition.

But the Lord says, “You shall utterly destroy them! (Deut. 20:17) – to be sure that they don’t “grow up” to become BIG problems in the future, the “thorns in the sides” that they did become for Israel in the stories of the Judges and Kings. This is why, although it seems so spiteful in the literal sense, the 137th Psalm is so *instructive* for spiritual life; remember –

“O daughter of Babylon, who is to be destroyed,
Happy shall he be who repays you as you have served us!
Happy shall he be who takes and dashes
Your little ones against the rock.”

In this passage the “rock” is faith in the Lord, the foundation upon which we are to build our spiritual homes; the “daughter of Babylon” is the love of dominion, the love of dominating over others. And it is true, we will never really be happy until we are prepared to break even the most innocent-looking, small and tender selfish loves against the rock of faith in the Lord with His more noble, more fulfilling loves.

In the story of our first lessons now it should come as no surprise that the name, Achan, in Hebrew literally means “trouble.” And the man himself represents the spiritual tendency in us to do what he did: - to disobey the Lord, to covet, cheat, lie, steal and ultimately profane the spiritual centre of life represented by his dwelling place, his “tent” in the story, by concealing in it the things acquired by deception for selfish purposes. From such tendencies and actions nothing but more such tendencies and actions can come. Therefore it is necessary that they all be destroyed, and it is also important how this is done: remember in the story it is said that they “stoned Achan with stones,” and then they burned all his offspring and possessions after they had also stoned them? The stones, like the rocks just mentioned, are the truths of the Word, truths about the Lord, His teachings and His eternal love. These are what we must use to combat the falsities we find within, just as David used smooth stones to kill Goliath and win a great victory for Israel.

But the fire is important, too. It is not enough to know something is wrong in our spiritual house; it is not enough to admit responsibility. There is a fire from the Lord that must burn as well, the fire of commitment, the fire of devotion, the fire of love – in the good sense, the “passion” to obey Him. This zeal, this fervent desire if allowed to burn freely will consume all doubts and negative emotions, all self-pity and covetousness, all hatred, resentment, contempt and other evils that stand in the way of the Lord’s blessing in our spiritual lives.

Yes, in summary it seems as though Achan’s family and many other characters of the Old Testament were innocent victims of an extremely primitive and unfair system of social justice. But it worked for them, and when we understand it on a deeper level it works for us, too. Again, the point is, all the characters in the story exist within ourselves, therefore we will be judged each according to our own ways. But like Israel we will be judged in keeping with the way all the various aspects and elements of our spiritual life work together, so we’d better be careful that we are not deceiving ourselves by thinking that we can hold a double standard, or that we can separate one aspect of our lives from another! Most importantly, let us not think that we can hide what is evil within what is good in our lives!

To obey one commandment from set purpose in a sense is to obey them all, we read, but to disobey one from set purpose is to disobey them all (CL 528, 529). The question of our lesson today is, can we truly be of one mind? Can we discover and root out those troublesome evils and falsities that somehow seem so innocent? Can we have real integrity, that is, wholeness, in our effort to follow the Lord? It seems difficult, at times impossible, but we are assured in the Word that is possible and that with the Lord's help it will be done. Let us pray for that help and not shirk our responsibility to deal appropriately with all the wrongs we discover within.

- Amen.

Lessons: Joshua 6 & 7: selections
 Children's talk on the Sin of Achan, his family being complicit

 Matthew 10:27-39 and Conjugal Love #528-529

A prayer for this service

O Lord, our heavenly Father, help us to remember, from day to day, that You are the source of all of our blessings and the cause of none of our problems. Your judgments are all just and Your mercy is forever. Yet we struggle with problems that are not our fault, and many suffer terribly over things for which they have no control (including earthquakes and other natural disasters...).

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom. Even as we learn from the mistakes and predicaments of others, and do our best to help them, help us, we pray, to rise above the concerns of this world and to focus on things of eternal value: – patience, kindness, innocence, humility, integrity and zeal for the truth.

Grant that no matter how we may be tested we may be instruments in Your hands to do what is right and good, that Your kingdom may come, and Your will may be done. ~ Amen.