

year of
biblical
literacy



SMALL GROUP

follow up material

allsaintsworcester

The God I Don't Understand (1): the problem of evil

In this talk, really a “primer” on the orthodox Christian view of evil, we explored the reality of evil and looked at how God has defeated evil. We focused particularly on how we as Christians are to live in the light of this victory, specifically our posture towards the present reality of our world and the call to implement this victory.

We were challenged to think about the extent to which we are complicit in perpetuating evil, sin and suffering, and the need to be people who take a stand against evil, working with God to resist it and help eradicate it from the lives of those we serve.

Read

2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6, Revelation 12:7-9, 20:2

Discuss

You might like to discuss some of the following questions:

1. How do we connect with people beyond the church who see evil and suffering as evidence that God either does not exist or is not something we wish to explore?
This accusation against Christian belief often takes the form of a well-worn dilemma: either God is omnipotent so he could prevent all evil and suffering, but since he obviously doesn't, he cannot be loving; or God is loving and longs to prevent all evil and suffering if only he could, but he can't, in which case he cannot be omnipotent.
2. How are we consciously and unconsciously perpetuating cycles of evil, pain and suffering because of our own sin and brokenness? You may wish to explore words and actions – said/unsaid, done/undone, but also consider financial decisions, how we develop our preferred relational networks (do we move towards those different to us or hide away from them?) and how any hard-heartedness or cynicism in us can limit our instinct to extend grace and offer

compassion. It might be helpful to revisit the distinction between different types of sin (natural, moral and spiritual).

3. What kind of spiritual life and awareness do we need to develop in order to “avoid temptation” (not just to sin, but to collude with the powers of evil) and instead live into “the ways of life everlasting”?

Do we appropriately recognise and respond to spiritual attack and opposition in our lives, whether explicit or hidden?

What does it mean in practice to “put on the armour of God” (Ephesians 6)?

Pray

Pray the Lord’s Prayer together.

Take it further

The best book on this topic is “Evil and the Justice of God” by NT Wright.

You may also find “The Skeletons in God’s Closet” by Joshua Butler helpful – this is a book that tackles lots of difficult questions we and others have with God, and has a very helpful section on evil.

For those looking to stretch their brains, try “Not the way it’s supposed to be” by the brilliant Cornelius Plantinga.

Some further thoughts

The Old Testament does not talk much about what God says about evil, but say a lot about what God can do, is doing and will do about it.

Insofar as the Old Testament offers a theodicy (an explanation of the justice of God in the face of counter-evidence), it is in the narrative of God and the world, and particularly the story of God and Israel.

The entire Old Testament hangs like an enormous door on a small hinge, namely the call of Abraham in Genesis 12.

This it appears, is intended by God the creator to address the problem of evident in Genesis 3 (human rebellion and the expulsion from the garden), Genesis 6 and 7 (human wickedness, and the flood) and Genesis 11 (human arrogance, the tower of Babel, and the confusion of languages).

Within that, we discover a second-order problem: Israel, the children of Abraham, may be the carriers of the promise, but they turn out to be part of the problem themselves. This unwinds through a massive and epic narrative, from the patriarchs to the Exodus, from Moses to David, through the twists and turns of the Israelite monarchy, ending finally with Israel in exile.

Within that again, we discover a third level of the problem: it is not only the human race that has rebelled, not only Israel that has failed in its task, but as individuals humans in general and Israel within that find themselves to be sinful, idolatrous and hard-hearted.

The great story which frames the Old Testament, then, begins with this triple statement of the problem and God's repeated answer. Evil must be judged, and judged severely.

In the Old Testament, judgement is primarily a matter of stopping evil in its tracks before it gets too far.

The threatened 'death' takes various forms: exile for Adam and Eve, the flood for Noah's generation, confusion and dispersal for Babel.

NT Wright

"The overarching picture is of the sovereign creator God who will continue to work within his world until blessing replaces curse, homecoming replaces exile, olive branches appear after the flood, and a new family is created in which the scattered languages can be reunited. That is the narrative which forms the outer frame for the canonical Old Testament."

From this point onwards, the body of the Old Testament carries the deeply ambiguous story of how Abraham's family, the people through whom God's solution was being taken forwards, was composed of people who were themselves part of the problem.

Somehow, strangely, and to us sometimes even annoyingly, the creator God will not simply abolish evil from this world... why not? We are not given an answer.

We are, instead, informed in no uncertain terms that God will contain evil, that he will restrain it, that he will prevent it from doing its worst, and that he will on occasion use the malice of human beings to further his own strange purposes.

Isaiah 40-55, commonly supposed to date from the time of the exile, wrestles with the question of how YHWH can be righteous, granted that Israel is condemned to exile.

Isaiah 55, the magnificent climax of the whole section, glories in the fact that the thorn will be replaced by the cypress, and the brier with the myrtle. The curse of Genesis 3 itself, along with the subsequent curses on Israel will be undone when Israel is redeemed and the covenant re-established.

If you want to understand God's justice in an unjust world, says the prophet, this is where you must look. God's justice is not simply a blind disposing of rewards for the virtuous and punishments for the wicked, though plenty of those are to be found on the way.

God's justice is a saving, healing, restorative justice, because the God to whom justice belongs is the creator God who has yet to complete his original plan for creation, and whose justice is not simply designed to restore balance to a world out of kilter, but to bring to glorious completion and fruition the creation, teeming with life and possibility, that he made in the first place.

And he remains implacably determined to complete this project through his image-bearing human creatures and, more specifically, through the family of Abraham.

But how? Woven closely into the fabric of Isaiah 40-55 stands the figure of the Servant:

YHWH's Servant, the one through whom YHWH's purpose of justice and salvation will be carried out.

And to our amazement and horror, we discover in Isaiah 53 that this fresh act comes into sharp focus in the suffering and death of the Servant himself.

The God I don't understand (2) // Violence

Intro

Jesus is the light of the world. He is the image of the invisible God. He shows us what God is like. Jesus shows us the God of redemptive self-sacrificing love, who would rather die for his enemies than smite them. But what about the Old Testament? What about all the many places where violence is carried out in God's name, at his command, or even seemingly directly at his hand? As Christians we inevitably and properly read these passages backwards, in the light of Christ, through the lens of His cross. But this can open up a massive chasm between God revealed in Christ, and the revelation of God that is in the scriptures before Christ. In short, Jesus is beautiful, the violence is horrible.

Compose to Compare: *Violence vs Love*

Get everyone to complete the line:

"Where violence is _____, love is _____."

Then read out the results.

Read

Joshua 11.6-15

React

What do you find most troubling in this passage? Or elsewhere?

Wrestling is good

When it comes to "the God I don't understand" the first thing to say is, yes, of course we don't, that's because He is God. We should be slow to presume that we will neatly understand. But this does not mean simple shrugs of acceptance. No, the biblical model of faith invites and applauds the questions/struggles/doubts/complaints, even accusations aimed at God!

Towards Understanding Joshua 11

1. The ugly may not be quite so ugly.

- Archaeology suggests much of the massive violence we imagine did not happen.
- Translation of terminology (king = general, city = fortification) reframes the civilian casualties we first imagine.
- Battle reports are stylised and exaggerated – if literally true it destroys narrative sense.

2. And on the plus side.

- Israelite warfare was progressive for its brutal context. (Limited, drive out, invite in)
- Strong demilitarisation impulse (horses and chariots are prohibited – these were the ancient equivalents of aircraft carriers, tools of domination and control)

We must acknowledge the ordered and stable context from which we are reading. Our brothers and sisters have not been cut down before our eyes, our daughters have not been savagely raped, our borders are not threatened, and law and order in UK has done a relatively brilliant job at holding humanity's propensity to violence at bay. We reap the benefits. But where all that breaks down – it becomes much easier to see that the reality of judgement and justice, of God calling time on a horrifically oppressive situation, is absolutely fitting. In fact, He is far more patient than we'd like. It was 400 years of brutal enslavement before God intervened to set his people free. This is the big picture in which all this is set: God arising on behalf of the weak against the powerful whose tyranny has gone on far too long.

Read

Matthew 5.38-45

Discuss

In the light of both Jesus' teaching to non-violence and the events of his cross and resurrection, do you think there are any situations in which violence is legitimate?

(there may be some disagreement here, as there has been for most of the history of the church!)

Even if there is sometimes a God given legitimacy to the carefully limited use of force for holding evil at bay, or for liberating the brutally oppressed, violence is a zero sum game. It does not win, it is never creative. The power of love, on the other hand, is a whole new kind of powerful.

Love is transformative. Love humanises, empowers the good, and calls out the truth in your 'enemy'. Love is risky.

Love is how we, in the light of Christ, are called to bravely resist evil. Not trusting in horses and chariots. Not seeking to dominate by force. But wielding the interrupting power of self-sacrificial love.

What might this courageous, creative, redemptive love look like for you?
Who is your enemy?

What situations can you re-imagine interrupted by love?

Pray

For the imagination, courage and composure to be people of the cross.

Taking it further

Quick Click: bethinking.org/god/unapologetic-christianity-is-god-a-monster

Read: The skeletons in God's closet (Josh Butler)

Watch: Josh Butler lecture: vimeo.com/163759001

The God I Don't Understand (3) // Suffering // John 11:1-44

Suffering is up there as one of people's biggest objections to faith in God. And, even with God in the picture, we have many questions, losses, disappointments, tears, doubts. Why did God allow this to happen? Why did He intervene then but not then? Has He even heard my prayers?

Yet, if we look at other world views, philosophies, religions, what we find is that there is no better (or truer) word spoken to our pain and suffering than the word of God to us in Christ Jesus and His coming kingdom.

Read

John 11:1-44

Ask Ourselves

3. What have you been helped by during times of suffering and what has been unhelpful?

Overview

The delay of Jesus in going to Lazarus (v.6) seems perplexing but Mary, Martha and the disciples, seem to be invited "not to put the full stop too soon": into the most desperate of situations, God in Christ brings resurrection.

Whilst in the case of personal suffering and tragedy answering "why me?" is impossible, and skipping ahead too soon with "it'll all be okay in the New Creation" is insensitive, Scripture gives us a wonderful, certain hope. Jesus' anger (v.33, 38) is a reminder that pain and suffering, evil and death were not how it was meant to be. Genesis 1-3 shows that God made a good world in which the capacity for genuine love meant genuine freedom (cf. Adam and Eve and the trees), and therefore, the possibility of choosing that which is not good or of God. Henceforth our world is broken and sin and death are a reality.

It's into this reality that Jesus steps. He shares in our suffering even to death on a cross. And his death achieves something more than just empathy with humanity. It deals with sin and leads to his bodily resurrection- the event in history which means a new day has dawned. Death is defeated, evil is dealt with. **"I am the resurrection and the life, said Jesus. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."** (v.25-26)

And the Spirit of God who raised Christ from the dead is at work TODAY bringing resurrection life, healing, comfort. Certain prayers and hopes may be “pending” until the New Creation but in the mean time we are called to “take off others grave clothes” (v. 44) and to trust God to finish of the story of our lives with resurrection.

Discuss:

- What do Mary and Martha (and Jesus’ responses to them) teach us?
- How can we understand John 11: v4 and v 15?
- Read Phillippians 4:11-13. Does this inspire you/frustrate you?
- Read Revelation 7: 15-17. What are you looking forward to about the New Creation?

Pray

- For one another, especially for anyone who is suffering or needs healing.
- Ask God to enable you to “untie people’s grave clothes” and be an agent of resurrection. How can you do that this week?

Take it further

READ: C S Lewis “The Problem of Pain”, Pete Greig “God on Mute”

WATCH: <https://www.bethinking.org/search?q=suffering>

The God I don't understand (3) // End times

Question:

If you had, say, 34 days before the end of the world what would you actually do?

Introduction:

Christian theology has always had the firm expectation of 'the return of the king' (that's where Tolkien got it from). Our ancient creeds (clarifying summaries of what we believe) include the sentence:

*"On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead."*

The New Testament is well stocked with this hope of Christ's return with numerous passages offering us intriguing windows on the actual end of the world as we know it.

Read: 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18.

Mega-fun game (optional):

As an optional extra, you could cut out each 'end-time' event (see appendix A) and attempt to arrange them in a biblical order, good luck.

Explanation:

And the correct order is... quite debatable! There are significant differences in how Christians have interpreted texts and attempted to put together a biblical picture of what is to come. Our interpretation is complicated by several factors:

- the extensive use of idiom and picture language in 'end time' texts (e.g. "in the air" was a phrase used for 'outside the city' and should be understood as a picture of royal welcome to the city, rather than a 'rapture' from it)
- the strangeness of the apocalyptic prophecy that is the book of Revelation
- the events of 70AD, in which the Jerusalem temple was completely destroyed (several texts, e.g. Mark 13 & Matthew 25, seem primarily to anticipate these 1st century events, of which today's readers are typically unaware).

In a sense, all Christian theology is end-time theology. The Jews looked for the "Day of the LORD", complete with resurrection and judgement, when God would establish his

kingdom on earth. In Jesus, the surprising move was that this new day has now dawned. But slowly. Like a seed. The final judgement is still to come.

So the kingdom is 'now and not yet': Joel's vision of the Spirit being poured out (Joel 2) is *now* fulfilled (Acts 2) but all things are *not yet* sweetly ordered under God; Jesus is *now* risen, but *not yet* everyone else.

Jesus is risen - This is the cosmic game-changer that kickstarts this new age and breathes vast hope into the universe – suddenly, despair is not an option: love has won, love wins, and love will win.

He is coming back to judge - There is one sat on the throne, and it's not any of us, which leaves us free not to judge or condemn. That's not our place. In fact, our place will be on the other side of things, we will be judged. Will we hear, "Well done good and faithful servant" (Mt 25) or be those just "barely escaping" (1 Cor 3) whose work has been without enduring value?

We really don't know when or how (Mt 24.36) - Our imaginations fail on this stuff, of course they do. Looking for 'signs' or attempting a detailed plan of how things will pan out is a waste of precious energy. We are called to prepare, like a bride before her wedding - an end-times mind-set should be clarifying (stripping away the unimportant and false) but not obsession inducing.

Discuss:

- What does all this mean for us now?
- Are we suitably hopeful? Are we suitably ready?
- Where are we prone to judge others? How is this fruitful?

We are called to love God and to love others. Our work is to hold onto hope and hold out hope to others as we realise that history is actually going somewhere, somewhere truly good.

"For all we know, we still are the early church" (Rowan Williams)

Pray:

For a renewed dose of hope.

For the humility and freedom not to judge or condemn others.

For the wisdom to get on with living out what God is calling us to.

Take it further:

Watch: Greg Boyd Q&A: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CpgSto4qtM>

Read: And The Lamb Wins (Simon Ponsonby)

Click: NT Wright: <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/farewell-to-the-rapture/>

Appendix A: Mega Fun Game

- a. The Millennium (the 1000 year reign of Christ as in Rev 20)
- b. The final judgement (as in Mt 25)
- c. The Incarnation
- d. The Church Age (now)
- e. The second coming of Christ
- f. Resurrection of believers
- g. Resurrection of unbelievers
- h. Earth Renewed (as in Rev 21)
- i. Eternal Glory (the eternal state)
- j. The Tribulation (time of great trouble on the Earth Rev 7)