

Where is God in all this?

28 June --- Rizpah

Speaking truth to power: Fighting for truth and justice

Notes and discussion questions for home groups or personal study – Brian Bull

Readings

Key verses

2 Samuel 21:1-14

“Rizpa took sackcloth and spread it out for herself on a rock.
From the beginning of the harvest till the rain poured down from the heavens on the bodies...”

Galatians 2:9-16

“When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.”

Matthew 21:1-13

“My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a 'den of robbers.”

Background

We all know that bad things happen in this world. But do we really need to be reminded about them? A couple of years ago Marcus took a party of his high school students on a visit to Auschwitz. Do we really need to be reminded of what was done there? There is good reason to argue that we should be aware of the terrible things that people have done to each other in the past in order to prevent things from happening again.

There are plenty of stories in the Bible that are disturbing, unpleasant, even horrifying, but they are there for a purpose, either to remind us of just how far human behaviour can fall if God is omitted from the equation, or to encourage us to stand against evil, oppression and corruption in the world.

The story of Rizpah is not a pleasant story, but it fits our theme well. It's the story of a woman who is willing to stand alone in the face of injustice, to stage a one woman protest, and by doing so to change the mind of the King and ensure that those were unjustly treated had their honour and dignity restored.

Oppression of the Gibeonites

Read **2 Samuel 21:1-14**

Israel had made an alliance with the Gibeonites, and allowed them to remain at peace in their own tribal territory. But Saul broke the covenant with them and sought to exterminate (NIV: annihilate) them. God was clearly angry that Israel had broken their covenant and sent a famine on the land – perhaps not so much a punishment but a wake-up call to alert King David that Israel had sinned and that the situation must be appropriately addressed.

- What parallel situations can you think of today?
 - What do you think would be an appropriate way to redress the injustice done?
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David's response

David sends for the Gibeonite leaders and offers to make amends. They have no quarrel with David, since it was Saul and his men who had sought to kill them, so they request that David hand over seven representatives from Saul's descendants to face punishment for past crimes. David agrees, and chooses (it seems somewhat arbitrarily) seven members of Saul's family to face execution.

But God doesn't remove the famine – at least not yet. David's solution to the problem is no more just than the crime itself. There is no suggestion that those chosen to pay for Saul's crimes had personally committed any violence against the Gibeonites.

- What were the reasons, do you think, behind David's decision?
 - Remember that Saul's supporters still represented a potential challenge to David's authority... Do you think he would have been so ready to hand over seven of his own supporters?
 - Unfortunately it's a fact that we (personally or as a society) consider some lives of higher value than others. How has the current pandemic highlighted this tendency?
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An acceptable sacrifice?

So the Gibeonites take Saul's seven chosen descendants and execute them "before Jehovah", which seems to imply "as a sacrifice to satisfy God's anger".

But it doesn't! God doesn't send the rain and end the famine, at least not yet.

One thing that we can take for definite from this story is that God does *not* accept human sacrifice. Neither does he value some human lives more or less than others. Other passages tell us that God doesn't even want sacrifices of bulls and goats. What he is looking for is the sacrifice of a broken heart and true repentance. Some casual readers might look at passages like this and conclude that the God of the Old Testament is a violent God, but the opposite is in fact true. God is not pleased with what David has done. But it takes Rizpah's protest to turn David around.

Rizpah's protest

Rizpah (whose two sons were among those executed) takes some sackcloth, spreads it out on a rock next to the bodies, and sits there protecting them from birds of prey and wild animals "from the beginning of the barley harvest (which was when the execution took place) until the rain poured down from heaven". It's not clear how long this takes, but the sense is that it's a significant length of time. A few days, or even a few weeks of no rain doesn't constitute a famine. When God sent a famine in the days of Elijah it lasted three months.

- Why did Rizpah stage this one-woman protest?
 - What do you think it cost her?... physically?... emotionally?
 - What was the result of Rizpah's protest?
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God's blessing returns

The end of Rizpah's protest is marked by the return of the rain and end of the famine, a sign that God's blessing is restored.

- What things have changed to cause God to end the famine?
- What does the story teach us about God's character?
- What can we do if we think we've made the wrong choices?... what does David's example show us?

Justice in a time of Coronavirus

Rizpah's story has many of implications in today's lockdown situation.

God is concerned about injustice, and requires repentance and restoration of wrongs. But we can't resolve unjust situations using unjust methods. We need to show true godly love and kindness, even to those we disagree with.

There have many questions about whether certain sections of our community have been neglected, treated unfairly, and as a result disproportionately affected by the consequences of the pandemic.

- In England between 25% and 35% of deaths have been in care homes (in Scotland 45%)
- People from BAME communities have been disproportionately affected.
- Deprived communities have significantly higher infection rates and more deaths than more well-off communities.

These facts are reflected in global as well as national figures.

- What specific issues do you believe we should be focusing on and seeking to raise awareness of?
 - In what ways would we want things to change after lockdown ends? How can we contribute to seeing those changes happen?
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Final thought

In spite of what might seem like a disproportionate and somewhat unnecessary number of deaths from Covid-19 over the past weeks, and the fact there are inevitably family and friends who are grieving for loved ones lost in difficult circumstances, Jesus says to us (Matthew 10:29-31):

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Let's pray for those who have given their lives in caring for others. Our NHS staff and care workers are worthy of special honour and respect.

Pray for wisdom and courage to stand up and denounce injustice whatever the cost. Pray that we will learn from the experiences of lockdown and be able to make our country and society more fair and just for all.