

THE GOD WHO WEEPS

The Heart of God and the Judgements of God

A God of Compassion

I remember reading many years ago a testimony of an elderly man of God who was preparing to speak on the judgement of God. As he pondered he felt God said to him, "Before you speak of my judgement listen to the tone of my voice".

The man of God recognised immediately that he was being warned that the subject of judgement was not one to be addressed in harsh and "judgmental" tones. He needed first to recognise that behind the strong and painful disciplinary action of God there was in fact a heart that was tender, compassionate and greatly reluctant to see such pain afflicted; there was a heart of love which was longing to bless, yet in faithfulness had as a last resort to bring judgement and pain. Thus the man of God was not prevented from speaking judgement but he was clearly reminded of a need for tenderness and compassion. The heart of God remains always "slow to anger and swift to bless".

Easter presents us with a remarkable scene in which this "tone of voice", this deep love of God, is vividly demonstrated as Jesus himself speaks of judgement. Luke records how on Palm Sunday Jesus approached Jerusalem by the descent from the Mount of Olives.

As the panoramic view of the city opened up, he wept over it. The tears were compulsive and prophetic, revealing the heart of God. He wept because he knew the appalling judgement that would come on the city as a consequence of its rejection of him and his Father.

It would have been appropriate if he had wept for himself over his own painful death that was shortly to come in the city, but his thoughts and tears were not for himself but for the people of the city and all the pain that was to come to them; he was weeping for a wayward, godless people. And as he wept he spoke out a word of both lament and judgment;

"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God's coming to you." Lk. 19:41ff .

Jesus was prophesying judgment by "the sword" on the city. Forty years later it happened; the city was besieged and virtually annihilated by a Roman army, with appalling distress and huge loss of life.

Two facts are highlighted by this episode: the first is that God is a God of great compassion and deeply reluctant, even distressed, to see people suffer under judgement. He is indeed the God who has "no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather is pleased when they turn from their ways and live". (Ez. 18:23) There is a striking echo of this truth in the Book of Jonah.

When Jonah warned Nineveh of the judgement to come on account of its wickedness, the people of the city from the king downwards repented of their evil and were spared. God was pleased. But Jonah was actually angry that God had had mercy on the city, and sulked. God rebuked him with the words "Nineveh has more than one hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" Nineveh was one of the most godless and rapacious cities that history has seen (vividly portrayed in the book of Naham) and ripe for judgement, yet God was concerned for it and concerned to spare it. Such is the deep longing in the heart of God for the worst of sinners to come to repentance.

What a contrast this is to the bitter vengeful anger of Jonah who seemed more concerned about his status and validity as a prophet than about “sinners who repent”. He seems to have failed utterly to grasp the fact that the prophecy he had been given of Nineveh’s destruction was designed to give the Ninevites an opportunity to repent, and that his ministry had actually been successful!

There is an important corollary to this Jonah story. It is quite wrong to think that speaking out a word of judgement is an “act of doom and gloom” and to be repressed. If it is done genuinely at the prompting of God and with a heart of genuine love and tearful concern, it can be the very instrument (and in some cases the only instrument) by which repentance can be brought about. (Gospel preaching which never touches on the judgement of God and the deep need of repentance loses much of its power!).

In this judgement/lament the tone of God’s voice is epitomised in the words of Jesus, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes”. They betray a voice of deep, heartfelt sorrow and anguish. They are like the voice of an anguished human father or mother who want to see their child blessed, but see their child turn away in wilful ignorance from the path that would lead to blessing and follow instead a path of pain and destruction. Such words remind us of the stunned anguish with which the writers of tragedy finish their stories in which something that could have been so happy and beautiful ended needlessly in pain and disaster. That is how God saw it.

The teaching ministry of Jesus had spelt out the pathway of righteousness, and his ministry of healing had shown the incredible graciousness of God. In them He had pointed out the pathway to peace. The tragedy was that Jerusalem had turned its back on both his teaching and his works and was about to kill him. The consequence would be disaster and the loss of all peace. Tragedy always leaves us with a sense of pain. God feels the pain!

The God who has to Judge.

It would be very good if we could leave the Palm Sunday scene thinking only of this love and compassion of God. However, the second feature which is highlighted by the story is that, no matter how much God loves sinners, weeps over them and desires them to be spared, the judgement of God remains an awful reality. In fact if judgement were not devastatingly real God would not need to weep! His weeping for Jerusalem was there because his judgement was threatening it and it was no empty threat.

It would have been interesting to have heard the reactions of the people in the Palm Sunday crowds to Jesus’ prophecy of the coming destruction of Jerusalem. The vast majority of people would doubtless have brushed it aside. It was far too busy and exciting a time to listen to “that sort of silly stuff” with the great Feast of Passover looming and so much to do and see. We do know, however, that the ruling religious elite were to hear the same prophecy in parable form later in the week from Jesus’ own lips and that what they heard would confirm their decision to kill him (Lk.20:9ff). For them this Galilean upstart was talking inappropriate and uneducated nonsense among those who were in every way his superiors. It aroused not only their scorn but also their bitter anger.

The Prevailing Modern outlook

Scorn and anger! These are still the two most common responses to any sort of speak about judgement in our own times. And this is particularly so among the “educated” elites of the modern world. The all-pervading liberal secularism has effectively brushed God and his restraints out of our thinking. With no God there can be no judgement!

Sadly, however, this prevailing world view has penetrated even the Christian world and we find Christian (and Jewish) scholars and leaders who insist that with God there can be no judgement

for he is not that kind of God. Love alone can be allowed. Their contempt is very evident for the traditional understanding of judgement as something God brings or allows as punishment for wrong-doing.

This, of course, is very far removed from the biblical witness. From the Garden of Eden in Genesis to the coming of Jesus as Judge in the book of Revelation God's judgement remains a constant, persistent and utterly central theme. It is written large in the Old Testament history of the Jews and their law, it is written in the life, ministry and death of Jesus and in the New Testament epistles.

Throughout the whole of Scripture one simple note is sounded: "the wages of sin is death". Thankfully it is not the only theme. The glory of the biblical witness is that there is forgiveness, avoidance of judgement and life wherever there is repentance and faith in God. This double message of warning and hope is plain for all to see, and the sternness of the message of judgement refuses to be "airbrushed" out by the foolishness of human intellectual wisdom.