

119 What is God NOT like?

This week, a friend has expressed continuing concern about the picture of God portrayed in the Old Testament. Yes, we can all see the expressions of God's love and constant (unmerited) forgiveness, but still we see in the Old Testament a fair amount about God's wrath and vengeance.

My friend's particular concern was the plagues, and especially so, given the absolutely central place that the exodus has in Jewish thinking, life, culture and tradition, and how this was taken up and amplified in its significance in the New Testament, e.g. the Lord's Supper.

As I told my friend, I don't have an 'answer' but here's my thinking this morning:

- What is God like? God is like Jesus. And God is like the loving Father that Jesus spoke about to his first hearers – like that wonderful prodigal father who loved *both* his sons!
- God wants, by any and every means, in any and every age, to *communicate that love*.
- God *uses people* in every age to express that love in word and action.
- God inspired Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets, to communicate that love in spoken word and in action, and then inspired people to write some words down for later generations.

(To give a sense of scale, rough dates are: Abraham 2000 BC, Moses 1500 BC, David 1000 BC, prophets 800–400 BC, then Jesus, 2000 years ago, and within 30–40(?) years, the NT writings.)

- God came to earth, in person, and showed God's love in words and actions.
- God inspired people to communicate that love, in words and actions, going out from Jerusalem, and the good news of Jesus spread like wildfire.
- God inspired some people to write letters to one another, some of which have been preserved.
- God inspired some people to write careful accounts of Jesus' life and teachings, some of which have been preserved.
- God inspired some church leaders to get together and work out which of the letters and writings (Gospels) were most trustworthy.
- God has continued to inspire people to communicate that love in words and actions, often using the inspired words of the Old and New Testaments to prompt them.
- God has inspired people to (interpret and then) translate those writings into loads of other languages.

Fine, but how does this trail of inspiration help my friend to come to terms with his plagues?

Well, God's got a bit of a problem! God wants to communicate his love to (a) the people at the time of speaking/writing (b) people in the centuries and millennia following, to the end of time.

Do you see the massive problem God has got? The worldview of people all those thousands of years ago was so very different from our own – it has gradually changed, century by century, and all the while, God has been trying desperately to draw us closer into loving relationship, and to enable us to more effectively live together in love.

So God worked hard on humankind, to gradually civilise us – although, looking around, there's still a lot of work for God to do – but let's take an example. How did God change our worldview into realising that although slavery had been the norm for millennia, it was actually wrong? If slavery is wrong, why doesn't the NT say, "Thus sayeth the Lord, slavery is evil. Stop it! Now!"

Sorry but that wouldn't work. God has had to be more subtle and *gradually* change our minds.

But let's now look at this from a different perspective. Let's try to see how *not* to understand what God wants. I really thank God for inspiring the Pharisees! They have such a good example and inspiration to me for 50 years. :-)

They earnestly and diligently studied their (OT) Bibles, to find out what God wanted, so where and how did they (according to Jesus) get it so spectacularly wrong?! I think they probably took it all too literally, and just used it to work out exactly what was right and wrong: what you had to do to avoid being cast into hell by God.

"You duffers!" said Jesus, "The purpose of the (OT) Bible is to teach you about ME! about God!"

So when we read the Bible, I think we have to remember that humankind is on a journey; God is trying to show us, century by century, how better to live with one another in love.

Now, the various bits of the Bible were written by fallible humans *of their own time*, and they said it as they saw it – albeit under God's inspiration. So when we read what they wrote, we have to look for the underlying message, and not be put off by the brutal worldview of the writers.

And I now realise just how important it is to decide whether the Scriptures are *inspired* or *infallible/inerrant*. If the latter, then when the OT writer says, 'God sent the angel of death, who killed all the firstborn of the Egyptians', then that is *exactly* what God did.

No, sorry, I don't believe that! That's not 'WWJD'. That's how they *interpreted* God's actions, according to their own worldview.

One final illustration of how Jesus interpreted the Old Testament: In Luke 4:16-20 he quotes from Isaiah, and says 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'. Let's check Isaiah 61:2. Look! Jesus' quotation was deliberately partial. Jesus ends mid-sentence with '*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*', but the sentence continues with '*...the day of vengeance of our God*'!

God doesn't change over the millennia, but *our view of God* (thankfully) changes, and we realise more and more and more just how loving and forgiving God is. God is not here to condemn *anyone*; God wants *everyone* to come to repentance – to turn and see God the all-loving Trinity.