

## ***Will God Stop Loving?***

*William Loader*

*Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His love endures until the day of Judgement  
(with apologies to the Psalmists)*

The idea that love will last forever is fragile. It is alas human to want to impose limits. What if my love is rejected? "I hate you! Why don't you love me!" is not an uncommon cry – and it comes out of love, hurt love. Vengeance is something bigger. Anger has its roots in pain and hurt and easily becomes hate and retaliation. The Sermon on the Mount challenges such hate in its deeper exposition of the command not to kill (Matt 5:21-28), but also in its insistence on turning away from retaliation and hatred of enemies (5:38-48).

When it declares that we should be "perfect" as God is "perfect" (5:48), this perfection is not primarily about quantity but quality, not flawlessness, but a total commitment to love. Luke's shorter version uses not the word "perfect" but the word "merciful" or "compassionate": "Be compassionate, as your heavenly Father is compassionate" (6:36). These words attributed to Jesus were not a new invention. They are at the heart of Israel's faith. Matthew depicts them as part of Jesus' upholding of biblical law.

Does love and compassion mean there should be no justice system, no courts, no police force? Is love about tolerating anything and everything? Clearly, not. It is love which requires that we have laws which protect people, for instance, from violence, and that sometimes means that we need to forcibly prevent such violence, indeed even restrain such perpetrators and to the extent of removing them from the community for a time. We need courts. We need rules. We need penalties which deter those who endanger themselves and others by speeding, for instance.

Do we need hate? Is the justice system a legal means whereby a community can hate wrongdoers? Sometimes we can hear it that way when media sources report crimes, and those who suffer from crimes of violence and abuse cry out for vengeance. One could even say that the justice system is designed to make sure that the hate does not go too far.

Such approaches to justice in the community stand in stark contradiction to approaches which see the justice system as a necessary instrument to bring protection and to care for people. At its best the justice system not only confronts wrongdoing and where necessary restrains wrongdoers, even in custody, but seeks to rehabilitate such wrongdoers and bring them back to healthy behaviour. In this there are stories of success and stories of failure.

The core of this healthy approach to justice is that it does not act out of hate but out of caring for and respecting the person. This is the reason why legislatures based on such principles have rejected capital punishment because that effectively gives up on people and embraces a response to crime based on hate or at least punishment with no prospect or intent of bringing change. It is a giving up of love and respect, as is the angry cry that authorities lock some people up and throw away the key.

It is surely valid to hope that those who commit violence whether physical or in any other way are brought to account. They should not be allowed to get away with it. This very natural concern is

widespread and informs the culture of most communities. It was certainly foundational in the communities of ancient Israel.

The Old Testament as a collection of writings from Israel's past reflects their grappling with what to do about such wrongdoing. Fortunately, the diverse answers in these diverse writings have come down to us with little if any attempt to harmonise the differences, indeed, the contradictions. Some writers held the view that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people and that God is in charge of this. Some of the histories even depict the nation as falling to defeat by surrounding nations when it turned away from God and winning victories when they repented and turned back to God. The righteous prosper; the wicked do not.

There were others who took a more realistic view and acknowledged that sometimes the wicked prospered and the righteous suffered. The Book of Job reflects some grappling with these issues and indeed includes different and conflicting explanations of why Job suffered. Its editorial frame favours the view that Job's suffering was not because he was bad, but then interprets it as imposed as a test by God.

Similarly, the suffering of the one called God's servant in Isaiah 53 is depicted not as happening because he was bad, but as brought about by God. Such a view rests on the notion that God controls all events and causes them to occur. This, too, ran into difficulties. God surely does not cause violence and abuse. The nations which some alleged were God's instruments for punishing Israel for its sin were, as some like Ezekiel came to recognise, also very sinful, indeed much more so.

The reality was that some people and some nations and groups did get away with violence and injustice and there was little prospect that they would ever be held to account. That may seem pessimistic, but it made sense. The more the thinkers in the Jewish faith were exposed to the machinations of the wider world, especially through being incorporated in the successive empires of the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans, the more such conclusions were inevitable.

God was not controlling all the events, but did this mean there was never any prospect of people and nations being held to account for their actions? The answer which emerged from their thinking and became dominant was that there would be a day of reckoning at some time in the future, and in the eyes of many, in the very near future. This could only be possible if God directly intervened to sort out the mess.

Thus people began to look to a day of judgement when God would call all to account, the living but also the dead. For this to happen the dead would need to be brought back to life. The traditional understanding had been that when people died, their spirits entered the abode of the shades, called Sheol or Hades, and were all but non-existent, sometimes referred to as like chirping birds, not really alive at all, but also not totally dead (Job 7:7-10; Psalm 6:5; Isa 8:19; 38:18).

Two beliefs led to new thoughts about the dead and both were about fairness. Surely the righteous who had suffered deserved some reward. Thus we begin to see the belief that at some point in the future they would be raised from the dead. To be alive again they needed a body, but it needed to be a superior body that was not vulnerable to the problems of their earthly body. Thus we find dreams of the righteous being raised from the dead in shining bodies like the stars (Dan 12:3). Some dreamt of all the righteous, those still alive and those raised from the dead, forming one happy community.

The other belief arose from the fact that to hold people to account, and especially the wicked who had since died, they would need also to have bodies. You cannot speak or see or hear without a body. Thus, there developed the notion that all would be raised from the dead and all would have to stand before God and be judged on the basis of what they had done in their lives (Dan 12:2). By the time of Jesus such beliefs were widely held. They are therefore also part of the world of Jesus and his contemporaries and of the Jesus movement. Jesus' vision of the reign of God reflects this framework of thought which he then adapted to claim that this ideal community of belonging and caring could already come into reality when people opened themselves to God in his world.

Belief that there must be accountability is one thing. Imagining how this might be is another. One popular notion was that the wicked to be judged by God would suffer punishment. They envisaged this not as corrective punishment or with a view to rehabilitation, but as permanent punishment. Indeed, some pictured God's justice as sending people into a situation where they would be permanently subjected to excruciating pain, often as being kept alive to experience being burned, indeed forever (Matt 13:41-43; 25:46; Rev 19:20). This is a far cry from the notion of justice discussed earlier, based on respect and caring.

Inevitably some will have developed their fantasies of terror as a result of their own pain and their desire for vengeance. Some have defended such violence on the basis that while it is inappropriate for any human to inflict it, because all humans are also sinners, it is right for God to do so, because God is good. God set the standards, the laws, and God set the punishments. God warned that people committing sin would be punished, so now they are to be punished. This is justice. God is consistent and good.

Such fantasies of terror have inspired images of hell. And while for some it has been with glee that they contemplate their enemies exposed to such terrible torture, for others the prospect has caused great pain and inspired their compassion to preach to sinners and tell them that they can be saved from hell if only they believe in Jesus. In effect, the message implies that we can be saved from God, or to put in more complex terms, God in love has sent Jesus to save us from the torments God plans to inflict on sinners. That makes little sense.

The underlying assumption in such constructions is that God will indeed stop loving and that God is quite happy to engage in such violence exposing unbelievers to an eternal experience of terrible pain. There are New Testament texts which can be cited to support such an idea and there are many Christians who still believe this about God.

Such an idea jars with notions of justice which human societies now recognise as appropriate. Endless violence against a person is an appalling infringement of human rights and the opposite of love. The belief that it is acceptable for God to behave like this because God is righteous has inspired many, mostly men, to claim the same right in engaging in domestic and other violence when they claim to be right and righteous.

More importantly, such violent notions jar with an understanding of God as loving and with the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount about loving both neighbours and enemies. Of course, this contradiction is present in the Sermon on the Mount itself which as elsewhere in Matthew threatens hellfire to the dissenters and disobedient (5:21-28). Christian faith purveys both stances and both stances have impacted on human history for worse and for better.

Do we hope for accountability? Yes, we can, but it must never be at the expense of compassion and be based on a notion of justice which we have long since learned, partly on the basis of the gospel itself and partly on the basis of the wisdom of thinking and caring people, is abhorrent. In this we have made God in our own image and so enshrined what must be acknowledged as evil.

*Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His love endures until the day of Judgement  
(with apologies to the Psalmists)*

No. Rather let the original texts stand:

*Give thanks to the Lord for God is good. God's love endures forever! (Psalm 100:5; 106:1; 107:1;  
118:1-4, 29; 136 as a refrain; 138:8)*