

A time to tear and a time to mend

Our theme for tonight (a time to tear and a time to mend) has been a bit of a challenging one. I started in the usual way when you are given a theme like this, by searching through the Bible to see what the Bible says about tearing and mending. I have programs on my computer to help with this so I did a search for the words “tear” and “mend” and associated words.

The word “tear” appears quite a lot of times. It’s difficult to say exactly how many without counting them all since tear (meaning to rip) is spelt the same as tear (as in cry), but there are a fair amount of verses to choose from.

One thing that springs to mind is the tearing of clothes. Tearing clothes was a Jewish way of demonstrating anguish. Often in scripture we read about people who are distressed about something and they tear their clothes.

When Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle and news came to David (2 Sam 1:11):

¹¹ Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. ¹² They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and for the nation of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

(2 Samuel 1:11-12)

You may remember when we were going through the book of Joshua, when Jericho was destroyed God instructed them that everything was to be destroyed or brought as an offering to God.

Everything made from silver, gold, bronze, or iron is sacred to the Lord and must be brought into his treasury.” (Joshua 6:19)

But you may remember that Achan took some of the sacred things and God was very angry. As a result when they tried to take Ai, the Israelites were defeated and at this Joshua tore his clothes:

Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the LORD, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads.

(Joshua 7:6)

So tearing clothes was a sign of distress or sorrow, even remorse.

However Jeremiah notes king Jehoiakim’s lack of remorse and notes that he did not tear his clothes. (Jeremiah 36)

The Lord told Jeremiah to get a scroll and write down the prophecies he was given against Israel, Judah and other nations. God hoped that Judah would repent and return to him. But we are told that King Jehoiakim would not listen. Every time a passage of the scroll was read, he cut it off and threw it into the fire.

Jeremiah 36:24

The king and all his attendants who heard all these words showed no fear, nor did they tear their clothes.

Interestingly, the one person who was not allowed to tear their clothes was the priest.

Leviticus 21:10

“The high priest, the one among his brothers who has had the anointing oil poured on his head

and who has been ordained to wear the priestly garments, must not let his hair become unkempt or tear his clothes.

The priest held a highly respected position in society. He was a man of God and as such he needed to demonstrate holiness. In terms of his appearance, careful attention was given to minute details because this reinforced the fact that the God whom he served is holy. So the way a priest dressed was to reflect this.

But the priest was allowed if necessary to tear other people's clothing as we read in our passage this evening. (Leviticus 13:47-59)

Leviticus 13:47-59

Regulations About Defiling moulds

⁴⁷ "As for any fabric that is spoiled with a defiling mould—any woolen or linen clothing,⁴⁸ any woven or knitted material of linen or wool, any leather or anything made of leather—⁴⁹ if the affected area in the fabric, the leather, the woven or knitted material, or any leather article, is greenish or reddish, it is a defiling mould and must be shown to the priest.⁵⁰ The priest is to examine the affected area and isolate the article for seven days.⁵¹ On the seventh day he is to examine it, and if the mould has spread in the fabric, the woven or knitted material, or the leather, whatever its use, it is a persistent defiling mould; the article is unclean.⁵² He must burn the fabric, the woven or knitted material of wool or linen, or any leather article that has been spoiled; because the defiling mould is persistent, the article must be burned.

⁵³ "But if, when the priest examines it, the mould has not spread in the fabric, the woven or knitted material, or the leather article,⁵⁴ he shall order that the spoiled article be washed. Then he is to isolate it for another seven days.⁵⁵ After the article has been washed, the priest is to examine it again, and if the mould has not changed its appearance, even though it has not spread, it is unclean. Burn it, no matter which side of the fabric has been spoiled.⁵⁶ If, when the priest examines it, the mould has faded after the article has been washed, he is to tear the spoiled part out of the fabric, the leather, or the woven or knitted material.⁵⁷ But if it reappears in the fabric, in the woven or knitted material, or in the leather article, it is a spreading mould; whatever has the mould must be burned.⁵⁸ Any fabric, woven or knitted material, or any leather article that has been washed and is rid of the mould, must be washed again. Then it will be clean."

⁵⁹ These are the regulations concerning defiling moulds in woolen or linen clothing, woven or knitted material, or any leather article, for pronouncing them clean or unclean.

Here there is an interesting set of guidelines instructing priests how to deal with contaminated clothing. It's hard to know exactly what the phrase "defiling mould" (NIV) means. The Message puts it as "a patch of serious fungus". The New Living Translation has it as "Mildew" but it is the King James Version that sheds light onto why this is treated so seriously. The KJV has it as "plague of leprosy".

Whatever the correct meaning, we are looking at a material that carries a disease. The person I feel sorry for is the priest. The priest in the Old Testament seems to be a bit like a GP, especially concerning leprosy. It seems that if there is a suspected case of leprosy, be it a person or in this case a garment, they are sent to the priest.

Remember the 10 lepers who came to Jesus asking to be healed and only one came back to thank him? Jesus told them to go and show themselves to the priest. – Leprosy was a very serious disease and needed to be dealt with seriously – so of course, at all costs leprosy was excluded from society. In the case of a person, that meant that they were excluded from society, considered unclean. The only way back into society was to be pronounced clean again. And the only person who could do that was the priest.

So the priest had to be a very skilled man in order to know how to deal with these things. He would have to be able to examine a person to assess whether they were clean or not.

I wonder how many priests became infected themselves as a result. It seems quite a risky job when you look at passages like this.

Diseases were just as serious a threat when contained in a garment. A suspected infected garment, in all likelihood it will probably have to be burnt but obviously garments do not come cheap so that

would be a last resort. So before it is burnt the priest was to keep it in his possession for a week, by which time it may have spread and therefore would be even more hazardous to handle.

If the disease had spread in that time, the priest was to burn the garment. But if the contamination had not spread then the garment was to be washed, then it would come back to the priest for another week. It is interesting that there is very little chance that you would get your garment back in one piece.

The only way that you would get your garment back at all was if the mould was to fade. In this case the priest would have to tear out the contaminated part and then just that part would be burnt, the rest of the garment would be deemed clean and would be given back to the owner.

All of this of course was done in an attempt to stop the disease from spreading and is very practical advice to dealing with a very real and serious threat to the people of that time. At all costs they needed to stamp out disease and stop it from spreading.

This has some parallels with how we should deal with sin

Sin should be taken seriously – treated as deadly (because it is)

We should watch ourselves carefully and ensure that the sin doesn't get any worse

We need to wash ourselves (seek forgiveness from God, repent) – washed in the blood of the lamb

We need to tear out that part that causes us to sin

Jesus said if your hand causes you to sin cut it off... if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out... In other words, take radical action – just as radical action was taken for getting rid of leprosy.

Tearing is quite a radical action if you think about it – it is not easy to undo a tear. A tear tends to be permanent – you may be able to patch up a tear but it will never be the same as it was before the tear. Tearing is usually a way of destroying something we want to get rid of.

The word "mend" only appears in the Bible three times. One of them is in Ecclesiastes 3, one is a psalm of David asking God to restore them and the other is in Joshua when the Gibeonites pretended they were poor foreigners with cracked wineskins that had been mended.

So does this mean that the Bible is more concerned with tearing than it is with mending? Not at all, if we take the Bible as a whole, I think the whole message of the Bible is about mending. To mend is to restore and if the Bible has one theme above all others it is restoration. The Bible is a story of God's restoration of the relationship between God and people.

In the beginning, in God's perfect creation there was a close relationship between God and the people he created. That was how God wanted it to be but that relationship was torn apart by sin.

Restoration came in the form of God's only son, Jesus. Jesus explained to his disciples that his body would be torn (broken) for them and for us. We should remember what that restoration cost Jesus. His flesh was quite literally torn for us.

I was very moved when I went to see the musical 'Jesus Christ Superstar'. One scene that I found particularly moving was when they whipped Jesus. The way they did it brought home to me the cost for Jesus to bear my sins. When he was whipped, his flesh was torn for me and for you.

But something else was torn that day.

(Mark 15:37-38)

³⁷ With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

³⁸ The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. ³⁹ And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, ^[c] he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

The curtain separated the holy of holies and was a barrier through which only the high priest could pass (and then only once a year). But now that barrier between God and people had been destroyed, quite literally ripped in two from top to bottom.

The relationship between God and people had been restored. Through the blood of Jesus we are able to enter the holy of holies.

(Hebrews 10:19-25)

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.