

READING

Judges 3:12-30

“Once again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and because they did this evil the LORD gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel. Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms. The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years. Again the Israelites cried out to the LORD, and he gave them a deliverer—Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjaminite. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a foot and a half long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing. He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man. After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way the men who had carried it. At the idols near Gilgal he himself turned back and said, “I have a secret message for you, O king.” The king said, “Quiet!” And all his attendants left him. Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his summer palace and said, “I have a message from God for you.” As the king rose from his seat, Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king’s belly. Even the handle sank in after the blade, which came out of his back. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it. Then Ehud went out to the porch; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them. After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, “He must be relieving himself in the inner room of the house.” They waited to the point of embarrassment, but when he did not open the doors of the room, they took a key and unlocked them. There they saw their lord fallen to the floor, dead. While they waited, Ehud got away. He passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah. When he arrived there, he blew a trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went down with him from the hills, with him leading them. “Follow me,” he ordered, “for the LORD has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands.” So they followed him down and, taking possession of the fords of the Jordan that led to Moab, they allowed no-one to cross over. At that time they struck down about ten thousand Moabites, all vigorous and strong; not a man escaped. That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years.” (Judges 3:12-30 NIV)

SERMON

Knife & Gun Crime – Why? (Judges 3:12-30 & John 18:1-11)

What a great story! I first heard that Bible story on a bus travelling from Portsmouth to Frensham, in Surrey. It was a double decker bus and I was on the lower deck with a group of other boys. We were all on a Jucos Houseparty and the whole houseparty had gone to Portsmouth for the day on a hired bus. Some of us were having a quiz and a question came up that led the leader who was with us to relate the story of Ehud and Eglon. As a boy of nearly twelve years of age, I was fascinated by this story. It was the gore, the fact that the sword could not be pulled out due to the fat of Eglon. But it was through the courage of Ehud that I then became a Christian.

Ehud was held up as a great man of faith, what some might call an MMV – a Mighty Man of Valour. He used his sword and killed the wicked king Eglon. What a hero – the saviour of the nation of Israel. Well at least went with God then, but we read in the next verse

“After Ehud died, the Israelites once again did evil in the eyes of the LORD.”
(Judges 4:1 NIV)

And if you read through the book of Judges that is the pattern.

- Israel does evil – go away and against God
- God hands them over to a foreign power who oppresses them very cruelly
- The nation then cry to God for help
- God sends someone to help them – usually using violence of some kind
- Foreign, oppressive nation is removed
- Israel follows God
- Israel does evil – go away and against God

It is interesting that swords or ox goads or donkey’s jawbones are used to liberate Israel. But is that really any different to what the saviours of the world are today. This is one of the ‘saviours’ of the world

[TERMINATOR 2 MOVIE TRAILER]

Films like the Terminator series, the Rambo series, the Robocop series, they all are saviours in a way, but they all use violence, just like Ehud did against Eglon – and we would say that they are heroes. Might we even say the violence was justified?

We have to remember that so many of our youngsters are brought up on this sort of diet, play shoot ‘em up games or shooter games on their PC or Gameboys or whatever. They are surrounded by images that seem to say, it is OK to be violent as long as you are saving people. In one game called Doom this is the blurb that goes with it

Welcome to DOOM, a lightning-fast virtual reality adventure where you're the toughest space trooper ever to suck vacuum. Your mission is to shoot your way through a monster-infested holocaust. Living to tell the tale if possible. The gameplay for DOOM is quite simple. This is not a cumbersome adventure game, but an action-oriented slugathon. You don't need the reflexes of a hyperactive eight-year-old to win, either--using your wits is IMPORTANT. To escape DOOM, you need both brains and the killer instinct.

On one Website alone I found the following shooter games as they are called

Alien 3	Fractal Fighters	Tank Battle
Arcadrome	Galacta	Tank-O-Box
Arya Vaiv	Moorhun	Tank Wars
AstroAvenger	M.U.S.H.A	Terroid
AstroFire	Operation Wolf	Tubular Worlds
Bot	Patriot Missile	UFO
Brickanoid	Rambo III	Urban Strike
Cheesy Invaders	Ranger Fox	V-Space Raid
Command Raid	R.I.P 3: The Last Hero	Xenon-2
Darius II	Sentinels of Ceth	Xerix
Day of Pigs	Sky Raider	XKing
Death Duel	Star Defender	Zak and Jack
Disasteroids 3D	Star Defender 2	Zzed
Doom Troopers	Star Defender 3	
Flak Attack	Tanks	

Do we wonder why gun and knife crime have increased? I do know ministers who play shooter games as a means of relaxation, but maybe because they are adults they know the difference between fantasy and reality.

Hands up how many of us when we were children played cowboys and Indians, or cops and robbers, or Star Wars, or something similar which involved the shooting of others with toy or imaginary guns or zapping them with ray pistols. Is that any different to the ‘violent’ computer games of today?

Now let us read another portion of The Bible. This time from the New Testament. The gospel of Matthew, chapter 26, beginning at the verse 47,

"While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him.

Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for."

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"'" (Matthew 26:47-54 NIV)

Now rather than violence we have pacifism. Rather than relying on the sword to get out of trouble, Jesus carried on his course knowing he was going to the cross, he was going to die. For Jesus it was the way of love, love for humanity. Is it that Jesus brought a gospel of love whereas the Old Testament was the gospel of violence, where you could wipe out whole nation groups? However in the New Testament do we see that rather than wipe out nation groups, they are to be converted? They are to become Christians, which can happen when they follow Christ and so crosses all ethnic and national boundaries, whereas prior to Jesus they had to become Jews, which was a matter of birth rather than a matter of conviction.

Many, many today are Christian or Jewish or Muslim or etc, etc because of an accident of birth – they happened to be born into that particular family who follow or tick the box for that particular faith, rather than be convicted by that faith and adhere to it and follow its teachings, etc. In the past many more were closely adhered to their faith, especially in the times of the Old Testament where nation or tribal loyalties were high and the loyal to your local god was also high. Read the full story of Solomon to see how he was taken away from God to foreign gods because of the loyalty of his wives to their particular god. It may be that God knew that the countries where they were to settle would never convert, and so to avoid pollution of Israel, they needed to be destroyed, they needed to be killed, wiped out. It seems very harsh and I must admit that it is on my list of questions that I want to ask God when I see him in person.

Jesus seems though in the passage we read to condemn the sword as he says in verse 52

"Put your sword back in its place,...for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." (Matthew 26:52 NIV)

he could have been thinking about the talk that God had with Noah after the flood had occurred and God said

"Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

"But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

**"Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed;
for in the image of God
has God made man.**

As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it."" (Genesis 9:3-7 NIV)

So it is wrong to shed a person's blood to kill others, to live by the sword or the gun, even though in the Old Testament this happened at the behest of God, but we have already been there.

Christianity is a way of love, the love of Christ as shown supremely in the cross.

So why do youngsters carry knives and in some cases guns now. Why do we seem to have more deaths and injuries due to knife and gun crime? Why is being the owner of a corner shop becoming one of the most dangerous professions going?

Is there more crime or more reporting of crime? Is there more crime or do we hear about it more due to television and radio? I look at something like Charles Dickens' depiction of London in Oliver Twist where you have gangs of pickpockets roaming the streets of London. You have people like Bill Sykes who are not averse to getting their own way by violence or even killing people. Do we live in a more violent society? Yes there are some places we may not want to walk at night – but there would have been in Victorian London as well!

However it does seem as if there has been a decline in morals, a decline in people having a moral code and some say that this is because the only moral code we have to live up to is the one we make ourselves. As Christians we do have the Ten Commandments and what Jesus said about living together especially when he said

"...'"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37-39 NIV)

But the generations that have grown up since the war have attended Sunday School in less and less numbers and so have not imbibed the Christian ethical code at that young age – something that then stays with most for a lifetime.

So are we condemned to a society getting more and more lawless? Are we going to hear more and more about knife and gun crimes? Can we do nothing about it? We could all go and join Street Pastors, but is it really applicable in this area? Do we see gang of people running riot all over the place? Not really, but is there then nothing we can do?

There are things we can do

- Prayer – we can join with others and pray for this city.

- Preach – we can tell others about what Jesus has done for us. The more we spread the message of Christ and his love, the more people will be influenced by love. We do not have to do this in a preachy way – it just alliterated but over coffee, over a drink, over whatever. We need to gossip the gospel, tell others what Jesus means to us.
- Pass it Forward – the other Tuesday I was speaking at the lunchtime Christian Union they have at Dr Barnado's. They had there a story of a man visiting a friend of his in London. The friends met at Heathrow and travelled to the Londoner's place by taxi. When the man paid he said to the taxi driver, "Thank you for a lovely ride, you really drove well. Thank you." The taxi driver beamed from ear to ear and said, "Thanks guv'nor."

When they were down the taxi had driven off, the man asked, "Why did you tell the taxi driver how well he had driven – that's his job"

"It might be," the friend replied, but I have brought a little bit of happiness into his life and maybe made him feel better. Perhaps today he will take another 20-30 fares and hopefully he will pass on some of the happiness he feels now to his fares and if half of those pass it on, then we will have a happier place.

"We need to pass it forward." Just then a lady came towards the 2 men and the Londoner smiled at her very sweetly, and she went very coy and hurried on. "Why did you smile at her, she was a very plain looking lady."

"I know she is not a beauty, but she is a teacher and just thing of her class today – they are going to be so well treated.

We may not be able to do a lot to reduce gun and knife crime, but we can pray, preach and pass it on, pass on the love of Christ to others, in words and in actions, even to strangers, undergirded by prayer.