

Mark 6:14-29 (Beheading of John the Baptist)
Ephesians 1:3-14
12th July 2009

I had a sermon planned for today, but I'm not going to preach it. It was about vision and the work the PCC has done in seeking God's vision for this church. But then I listened to the news and heard of the deaths of eight servicemen in one day in Afghanistan. And I came back to the gospel passage for today, feeling angry, and I thought, 'This is the Gospel of the Lord? Really?' Because it's pretty grim reading in the Bible about the revenge killing of a holy man by a ruthless woman who manipulated her own husband and daughter. Why is this sort of story included in the Bible? What is there of God here?

That's what makes so many people dismiss the Bible and Christianity out of hand. It's all soaked in violence they claim; religion has been the cause of so much war over the millennia that no civilised person could want anything to do with it. That, in a nutshell, is the major argument of *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins' recent rant against Christianity.

Christianity has nothing to say to most people because it's ridiculously out of touch with reality – the reality in which young people are sent to a far away country to face danger and death for questionable political purposes. Religion encourages violence and bigotry, people say. We don't want anything to do with it. There is no good in it.

So what do we say, as Christians, when people ask us why God lets things like this happen? I don't have an answer any more than you do. But these aren't new questions. When people told Jesus about the death of his cousin John, surely they asked him why it happened. Jesus gave no answer, but he went off to a quiet place to grieve and to be with God (Matt 14), before the crowd pressed in on him again. And though I don't have an answer, I know where to look for an answer. I know I can look to Jesus, the living Word of God, who knows what it's like to live in a world where death and suffering seem to be in control. And I know I'll find an answer in the written Word of God if I allow the living Word to stand beside me and guide me into truth.

A partial answer comes in today's epistle. Paul reminds the Ephesians and us of the big picture, because we lose sight of it so easily when we're caught up in day-to-day worries. He reminds us that God has a plan for his creation. And although things might look shaky and uncertain from time to time, God's plan is not to abandon the world but to save it from itself. And God has chosen and blessed us in Christ from the beginning of time, and has given us the briefest glimpse of his plan for our lives and the world. Here's another translation of those words: "God let us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him ... It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for."

This is our faith. That God's picture is bigger than ours; that if we don't know the answers to this world's problems, God does; that everything comes together in Christ Jesus, who is the answer because he loved us enough to come to live beside us and give up his own life so that we can have life. We don't have to know the answers because we trust in God who does know and who has a plan that the world will be saved, that you and I will be saved, no matter how much we mess it up and get in the way.

I was part of the Prayer Stop team at the Mortimer Fun Day last week and I spoke to someone who was very angry at God. She'd heard all the arguments: God doesn't send suffering, it's caused by humans; God stands beside us in our suffering; faith will help you have the strength to cope. She'd heard it all and didn't want to hear it again. I knew I didn't have an answer for her anger and pain; so I just listened to her story, and stood beside her in the pain. And I did that because I believe that's what God's bigger picture asks of me. I believe that God stands beside us in our pain and calls us to stand beside others. That God knows our anger at the deaths of so many service people in Afghanistan; and God feels the pain of the bigger picture of the suffering of the Afghan people, and the misplaced zeal of the religious fundamentalist that causes the suffering. I believe that God is big enough to hold all of that, and the disbelief of those who are hurt by the failures of organised religion. And I believe that God will, when the time is right, gather up all things in himself for good. This is the hope that keeps me believing when I question and doubt. And this is the faith that propels me to tell others that God is not vengeful and doesn't turn a blind eye to our suffering, but God loves the world and each one of us.

You and I have an opportunity in all of this suffering and violence. We don't just have to feel angry or numbed by it. Just up the road are several hundred people who are more affected than you and I by the news of the last few days because they or their loved ones are being posted to Afghanistan. We have the opportunity to stand beside them - perhaps in prayer, or at the school gate, or at the shops or leisure centre - to hear their anger and their worry, to be Christ to them.

It won't give them or us an answer to why it happens, but it will, I believe, take some of the suffering away, because it will be held within the love of God.

I pray that we'll have the courage to take the opportunities God gives us. And I pray that when you are angry at God, or have lost the strength to believe and hope that God is good; that God himself will give you another glimpse of his big picture and will give you the gift of faith and the strength and courage to share it with those who cannot believe.

Gill