



A sermon for the Choral Evensong at Wells Cathedral, preached on Wednesday 1 April by the Reverend Dr Kate Bruce, RAF Chaplain

Wednesday of Holy Week

Isaiah 63.1-9 & Revelation 14.18- 15.4

The theme of our Holy Week sermons is: Moving Deeper into Love.

So, I wonder how you reacted to the readings today? Isaiah pictures a warrior, spattered with crimson, full of wrathful vengeance. He comes from Edom, a place symbolic of the enemies of God. He marches in splendid robes - the victor who has slain his enemies. The picture is one of fury and violence.

The image of treading the grapes in a winepress is a picture of the fury of God. It links this reading to the passage from Revelation, where the blood flows like a river from the winepress of the wrath of God.

I want to treat the scripture with utmost seriousness, but I find myself wrestling with these images. They need careful, thoughtful reflection. Are we to uncritically absorb them?

What happens if we read these images through the lens of Jesus Christ - allowing scripture to interpret scripture?

Jesus tells us that he comes to do his Father's work. What does that look like? If Jesus came treading the grapes of wrath, spilling the blood of his enemies, like wine running in the gutter, we would see this in his life. But we don't.

Wine is poured out in abundant grace – at the Wedding at Cana. The wine of celebration.

When the disciples start jockeying for power and position, Jesus says '*the rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them and their great ones are tyrants over them, not so with you.*' He calls them to servanthood.

Jesus doesn't enter Jerusalem on a chariot, with sword unsheathed. He doesn't come in violence, He comes in humility – deliberately choosing a donkey over a war horse. That's not an accident.

When Peter cuts off the ear of the High Priest at the time of Jesus's arrest, Jesus

tells him to sheath his sword.

Jesus garments are not spattered with the blood of God's enemies, but with his own blood poured out. He shows us a different way. Not the way of violence and retribution. He absorbs the hatred of his enemies and overcomes it in ways far beyond the imagination of the wisest theologian, or the pen of most gifted poet.

In Revelation – notice that the wine press is situated outside the city. A little detail that might help us. An interpretive key

Jesus is crucified outside the city. It is here, at Golgotha, where the blood flows like a river. Jesus is the one trodden in the wine press – the one who willingly endures such pain. He does not retaliate. He does not meet their violence with more violence. He is the Prince of Peace.

It is not wrath that drives Jesus forward, but love - a love that beckons us deeper. He doesn't pour out the lifeblood of the nations – like Isaiah's warrior. He pours out his own lifeblood. Freely. He could have called down angels. He could have said 'no' to the cup he was offered. He doesn't.

He absorbs into himself: the wrath of powerful people; the fury of dominating political systems, the ire of oppressive religious authorities. He takes upon himself – the sins of cruelty, violence, abuse and idolatry in transformative love. In his death he embodies his own teaching from The Sermon on the Mount: *'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.'*

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.'

The image of God as the wrathful warrior cutting down his enemies in vengeance is challenged within scripture itself.

Ah but – you might say...surely God does not wink at sin? Aren't you making God too soft, too forgiving? Look to the cross. Your answer is there. The judgement of God is holy, and loving. We see it clearly in the arms of love stretched out on the cross.

You are loved beyond all measure. Do not be afraid. Run like the Prodigal into the arms of love outstretched. And know that you are welcomed by Jesus. Always.

The Reverend Dr Kate Bruce
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