

Just now, chapter 31 of Numbers appears to me to be one of the most complicated in the whole Bible. It wasn't always that way. If you look at it simply in Sunday School terms or in playground language, it can be summarised quite straightforwardly: "thanks to God, Moses gave a good hiding to the enemies of the Lord," – and quickly move on to the next bit. But if we look more closely, there is plenty to shock us. On the instructions of the LORD, Moses organised the genocide of an entire people as "vengeance".

Worse still, the text tells us that Moses was "irritated" that the army did not complete the job, by leaving the women and children alive, and so ordered most of them to be executed. And just in case one were to argue that God might not approve of this implementation of his word, we read that whereas some 24,000 Midianites died, all the soldiers of Israel came back safe and sound, leading to the conclusion that it was the LORD who had protected them.

When we read this text today, it sounds much more like something Daesh would do rather than the people of God. Not only that, a great commentator from a bygone era, Matthew Henry, did not hesitate to describe these actions as a "holy war" – an expression which is no longer quite as in fashion as it was then.

So there are plenty of questions. Why bother reading this passage at all today? How can we understand such an apparently bloodthirsty God? What could we derive from this text for our benefit?

Let's take the first question. I would have found it much easier to skip over this chapter in my series on Numbers. If we're honest, I think that each of us tends to do that kind of thing as we read the Scriptures. We dwell more readily on the easy, "nice" passages ("the Lord is my Shepherd...") and don't bother with the bloodier ones. This despite the fact that we assert the authority of Scripture as a whole; particularly in evangelical circles, we often quote 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is inspired by God and useful to teach, convince, correct, and educate in righteousness...".

In our personal reading of the Bible, there's nothing wrong with us focusing on those parts which speak to us more particularly or that are easier to understand. But if we take our beliefs about the Bible seriously, we cannot simply content ourselves with ripping out those pages which don't suit us at first glance. If we do persist in doing so, we'll end up with a very distorted vision of what the Bible is saying. We will throw out isolated verses to attempt to prove the correctness of our own opinions, and in doing so, as Jesus said, strain at gnats and swallow camels.

How many Christians today despise Muslims by highlighting the violence of jihad? To do so is to forget that similar "holy wars" are not only part of Christian history down to the present day, but are also to be found in the Bible. If we do not face up to this, we are hypocrites, and that will quickly become apparent.

So let's take up the challenge of reading these more difficult texts and allowing ourselves to be called into question by them. How could this Scripture be "inspired" and "useful"? One of the best explanations of the Bible that I have ever heard goes something like this: "The Bible is the story of arguments between different people trying to understand what God wanted them to do. This argument is still going on today: we now call it 'the Church'."

I find that to be a pretty good description. We are gathered here this morning because in some way or another each of us feels called by God. We are trying to understand what he wants of us. Sometimes opinions may differ. But like the apostle Paul, we have the conviction that "Christ has got hold of us". And that through the person and the work of his Son, the Father has called us. We don't understand everything, but we can't help ourselves, we want to know him.

I think that this perspective may be able to help us here in Numbers 31. Rather than moving right along, we can stop and ask ourselves some questions: 'why on earth is it there? What on earth was God thinking? What on earth were Moses and the people thinking? What had the Midianites done to deserve that? God, are you really so bloodthirsty and arbitrary?' And in doing so, we are entering into a dialogue with the text and with God.

These are difficult, tortuous, and dangerous questions, but I believe that this is precisely how the Scriptures are inspired and useful to "teach, convince and educate in righteousness": they are an invitation to us to constantly call ourselves into question. This is what will help us to become, as 2 Timothy 3:17 says, "equipped and ready to do every good work": to be mature in our thinking, enlightened by the Spirit of God who teaches us as we question ourselves before him.

And that is why we, today, are not engaging in jihad. We do not take the text as a series of instructions to be copied today, but first and foremost as a narrative of how those who have gone before us understood things, and secondly as an invitation to consider the fundamental questions it raises.

This approach is also something of an exercise in humility. If we pick and choose in the Bible as we wish, we are in fact putting ourselves in the place of God. Instead, let us consent to place ourselves "under Scripture" and to proclaim "the whole counsel of God", including the more difficult parts. And when we see a particular way of obeying the Word of the LORD that shocks us, as it certainly does here, let it also be a call to humility on our part: what might future generations say about how we apply God's Word today?

When I travelled to Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, I had the disagreeable realisation that a few generations earlier, my ancestors could very well have gone there, not to visit but to trade, buying the people they met and bringing them back as their slaves – and be

justifying doing so with a Bible in their hand. Our responsibility is therefore to seek to understand what God wants of us, with as much humility as possible.

So what can we take away from this text today?

Firstly, we can observe that while God orders Israel to “take revenge” on the Midianites, he does not dictate how this is to be done. What comes afterwards is what Moses understood God to want. The fact that the army was fully protected suggests that God was not unhappy with the outcome, but neither can it be said that the *modus operandi* was divinely inspired for all time.

We can also note that Moses had to do this before dying. Generally speaking in the Old Testament, it can be observed that there was a less well-developed idea of the afterlife; the idea that God’s justice was to be meted out on earth in this life was much more prevalent.

In addition, we can note that this vengeance was neither sudden, nor arbitrary, nor even disproportionate. Verse 16 alludes to the events of chapter 25. After Baalam’s failed attempt to curse the people, he succeeded in turning them away from God through a ruse: the Midianite women seduced the Israelites into immorality and into idol-worship.

In Numbers 25, we read that God’s judgement had impacted some 24,000 Israelites before being halted. His judgement on the Midianites did not come so speedily; the events of chapter 31 take place some time later. Some commentators have done the math, and established that a similar number of people were affected by this judgement.

From this it may be deduced that this was not summary justice: time had passed, and it might be assumed that some people may have repented, just as Rahab had the opportunity to be saved from Jericho.

Neither was it arbitrary justice: it corresponded to serious actions that had been undertaken against Israel. It did not exclude the women, because they had been actively involved in the events.

And last of all, it does not appear to be disproportionate. Even if such an outpouring of violence is dreadful, it is not the same as that sworn by Lemek in Genesis when he threatened 70-fold vengeance if anyone were to attempt to harm him. “An eye for an eye” is not very appealing, but it is a lot better than escalation.

This text therefore allows us to identify some aspects of the character of God which may provide some reassurance, even if we don’t understand everything. He is “slow to anger”. His justice is not arbitrary; his punishment is not disproportionate. And even if we are perturbed by the deaths of women and children in this narrative, we can also

note that some were spared: small consolation though it may be, this is indicative of mercy nevertheless.

And lastly, we have the benefit of the New Testament. In the Old Testament, God's plan was mostly worked out through a specific ethnic people and a given territory, but already there was the prospect of "all nations" being blessed by him; there had already been those, like Jethro and Sephora – both Midianites – as well as Rahab, Ruth, Naomi and many others, who had been incorporated into the people of God from other nations.

In the New Testament, Jesus unequivocally declares that his Kingdom is not of this world; that no geo-political entity is henceforth entitled to go to war "in the name of God"; Paul in turn reminds us that our struggle is spiritual is not physical.

So let's remember from all this that God is a God of justice and mercy; that the Scriptures that have come down to us are useful to show us how, at different times, God revealed himself and more especially out those who sought to follow him understood him; and that they are also useful to drive us to think seriously about major issues such as justice, action and forgiveness.