

As If Theology

This idea has been buzzing around in my mind for several months. I'm not sure what started it, but it was reinforced when I discovered an account in the Bible when Moses had just had one of his major bust-ups with the wandering tribe, and some of them quizzed him afterwards: it feels as though our God has forsaken us; we must have done something really bad.

I've been reading a book *The Master and His Emissary* by Ian McGilchrist, in which, among many points of real interest, he reminds us that we cannot ever see the world 'as it is'; our view is always mediated through our senses and our brains. As we have seen during our excursion to the optician's practice, it is easy to adopt an over-confident stance about our own view of the world. If that is true for the physical world it is surely even more true of any pretensions we may cherish about our understanding of God.

Drawing together these two observations I think I have the beginnings of a new look at the Bible, especially the Old Testament, which many of us find problematic.

- Talk of a cruel, violent and vengeful God presents us with particular difficulties.
- Talk about God that suggests God is self-obsessed with God's own glorious reputation is distasteful to modern minds.
- What are we to make of the prophets whose writings include judgement and hope side-by-side in extreme forms.

Much can be retrieved from this troublesome situation by reading the uncomfortable statements prefixed by a phrase such as *it's as if*. The resulting reading of the text thus reflects not objective truth about God; rather it reflects the conflicted minds of the people: it's as if God was angry; didn't care; wasn't bothered; was looking the other way. In a rather extreme (but not, biblically, uncommon) scenario *it's as if* God was ordering us to spare no-one, not even women and children.

We might find ourselves using very similar words in our own time: where was God when those terrorists destroyed Omagh town centre, or the Twin Towers, or when flight MH370 disappeared or when the South Korean ferry turned over and sank. Such a list grows weekly as news reports bring to light one tragedy after another. Though now (for some) the reaction might be slightly different: they will conclude that the whole God idea is baseless and pointless and we'd be better off without it.

Many people continue to find, in the more literal interpretation of these biblical stories and the theology developed from it, a sense of 'explanation', that enables them to build a satisfying model of the world and themselves in it. Misfortunes are described as 'judgements' for errant personal or social behaviour. I'm thinking of things like the fire at York Minster following the appointment of

Professor David Jenkins as Bishop of Durham, and judgements of all kinds following society's increasing acceptance of the place of women in ordained ministry, and the rights of gay people to be fully accepted and respected

We've already looked at one story from the Bible that gives us difficulty. It's the story from Joshua 6 and 7, where the people were forbidden to take booty for themselves when the cities of Jericho and Ai were destroyed. The booty belongs to God, not to you.

Here's another. In Judges 11:31 Jephthah makes a very rash promise. Try to view this too in the light of *as if* and see if this view adds to your understanding. Does it open another window for you? And then use this lens (but of course, not exclusively this lens) as you read your bible.