

My teenage nieces have just moved to Australia. Their father, Lynne's brother, has got a new job working for UCB Christian radio in Brisbane.

So last week the kids joined him in Australia. And so Monday, was their first day ever in an Aussie School.

And they returned dismayed. Came home to quite disturbed by the behaviour and attitudes of the kids: the lack of interest and participation by the Aussie kids at school.

At the end of my sermon today, I want you to vote on how my nieces should respond. They need your help.

Should they

Hide - withdraw from the school, perhaps try home schooling.

Behave like the little Aussies - simply adopt the the bad behaviour and attitudes, since everyone else is doing in and it's hard to fight against peer pressure.

Seek change - set up a prayer group or approach the Principal or use the school rules and processes to bring about change.

Kill them - shoot the Aussie kids. Remove bad behaviour from the land by killing bad people

Look in the mirror - use the bad behaviour of others, to consider afresh, their own behaviours and attitudes.

I offer these options, because all 5 of them are present in the book of Deuteronomy.

Last week we started a new series, opening the 5th book of the Bible, the book of Deuteronomy. Deutero - second; nomos - law. the second law.

We're opening Deuteronomy for 3 reasons.

1 - Because as part of our preaching diet, each year I try to have at least 1 major Old Testament series.

2 - the book of Deuteronomy is a practical book. It tells us how God's people lived, practically. And this year is a practical year. A year in which we get to make choices, to vote, about how New Zealanders should live. So opening Deuteronomy might help us think about how God's people could vote.

3 - The book of Deuteronomy is a book about change. About how the people of God change, move, from dessert wanders, to settlers, with houses, jobs, taxes.

So when I heard about the hard time my nieces are having in Aussie, I thought of Deuteronomy. Both stories of people moving to a new land. Both stories of moving to a land already settled, Canaanites in Israel, Aussies in Australia, both with already has existing patterns of behaviour.

So how does God instruct Israel to respond, in a new land, to the people around them.

And everyone of you has neighbours. And family. And workplaces. Who behave differently than you. How should you respond?

Hide -

Behave like them -

Seek change -

Kill them -

Look in the mirror -

Because every option is present in the book of Deuteronomy.

<<Seek change. This is best seen in Deuteronomy 19:1-3 *Then after you are settled, you must choose three of your towns to be Safe Towns. Divide the land into three regions with one*

Safe Town near the middle of each, so that a Safe Town can be easily reached from anywhere in your land. Then, if one of you accidentally kills someone, you can run to a Safe Town and find protection from being put to death.

This is why Christians should vote and should stand for local council and should train to become lawyers and town planners. Because Israel is going into a violent land. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Yet for Israel, life is sacred. And God is practical. So if God loves life, then for God's people, their legal systems and how they build roads and how they plan their cities should reflect that.

This is seeking change. The people of God will adopt different laws. The people of God will practice different town planning. The world, the people around them like the Canaanites, might be violent. But the people of God will offer protection.

And so one approach to people who are different than you, is to seek change. To use the courts and social structures of your day to work of peace and justice.

So that's one model in Deuteronomy 19 - seek change, by establishing a just and fair society

Which is one thing my niece's could do in response to bad behaviour. Seek change by looking at the school rules and talking to the teachers and by behaving differently themselves.

A second response is also in Deuteronomy.

<<Kill them.

When I read to you just before from Deuteronomy 19, I was a bit naughty. I cut off verse 1. Here it is

1 Soon you will go into the land and attack the nations. The LORD your God will destroy them and give you their lands, towns, and homes.

So this is another approach to people who behave badly. Destroy them. And this is one of the big questions that I find Christians and non-Christians have about the Old Testament. How could a God of love, kill and destroy the Canaanites.

Before I go there, did anyone here watch Cambell Live on Friday.

<<If you did, ou would've seen the mayor of Carterton, Garry McFee, calling for the return of capital punishment. Look at the bumper sticker the girl is holding: Make New Zealand a safer place. Kill violent people. Bring back capital punishment.

<<Play video clip.

<http://www.3news.co.nz/Video/CampbellLive/tabid/367/articleID/63601/cat/84/Default.aspx>

3 things I found fascinating about the video clip.

1 - That was Friday. So the "kill them" option is not just back in Deuteronomy. It's out there in New Zealand today

2 - Garry is quoting the Bible. 10 commandments. There in Deuteronomy. He's using our book to support capital punishment.

3 - Kill them is not his only option. He also likes the hide option. Did you hear that? He said he wants to go and live in a cave. Pretend evil doesn't exist.

And so we read in

<<Deuteronomy 12:29-31 *The LORD your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess.*

Kill them. That's another response to bad behaviour.

<<But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, 30 and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same." 31 You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.

So, lets be honest. This is a hard and violent part of the Bible. I bet you've not heard many sermons on those verses. Much easier parts to preach.

Secondly, these are isolated verses. The Old Testament is not full of this stuff. The killing of the Canaanites occurred over 1 generation. and most of the wars fought in the Old Testament were certainly not in anyway endorsed by God.

Thirdly, that the understanding of God does evolve and mature as the Bible proceeds. Take our Bible heroes like Abraham and David and Solomon. All had multiple wives. Yet I've never heard a sermon supporting multiple wives today. So the understanding of God as it applies to marriage in the Old Testament does evolve and mature as the Bible proceeds. So that can help us interpret how God treats the Canaanites?

Fourthly, that we're talking here about a sense of moral outrage.

That if your neighbours were and I quote from Deuteronomy 12, about to "burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods", and have done so for generations, you'd want to do something. You'd want justice. You'd want a God who acts on behalf of innocent children. So there is a sense of moral rightness about a God who judges.

So the Old Testament stories - of Sodom and Gommorah, of the flood, of Canaan, are a reminder, that in the face of appalling and continous sin, with no sign of repentance, that God does act.

Which makes me wonder if love and justice are 2 sides of the same coin. That God has a passionate concern for creation. And so God will act, when God's creation is being spoiled, harmed and abused.

Two sides of the same coin. Love and justice.

And the problem comes when we concentrate on only 1 side of the coin:

God is all love, and so we only talk about mercy. God is all justice, and so we only talk about sin.

Heavy stuff aye. Heavy stuff for 21st century Westerners on a Sunday morning, so for a moment of light relief, let me read to you from *The Year of Living Biblically, One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*,

Day 62: Time for me to tackle the ... most commonly mentioned punishment method in the Hebrew Bible stoning. So I figure, at the very least I should try to stone. But how?

I figured my loophole would be this: The Bible doesn't specify the size of the stones. So ... pebbles.

A few days ago, I gathered a handful of small white pebbles from Central Park. Now all I needed were some victims. I decided to start with Sabbath breakers. That's easy enough to find in this workaholic city.

Here's the thing, though: Even with pebbles, it is surprisingly hard to stone people.

I thought I would pretend to be clumsy and drop the pebble on his shoe. I did. And said “sorry” and leaned down to pick up my pebble.

But he leaned down at the same time. And both almost banged heads. And both apologised. Probably the most polite stoning in history.

And so the book goes on. The Year of Living Biblically, One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible. The ending’s really interesting.

I quote: “After taking the Bible literally for a year; I’m still agnostic. But I’m now a reverent agnostic. I now believe that life is sacred. That there is something transcendent, beyond the everyday.”

<<To summarise: In the face of bad behaviours and attitudes, we can

- Hide -
- Behave like them -
- Seek change -
- Kill them -

Or we could

<<Look in the mirror -

Deuteronomy ends with consequences. Two whole chapters when actions have consequences. So to Deuteronomy 28:15 *However, if you do not obey the LORD your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:*

So this is another way to act. When you see the Canaanites behaving badly, look in the mirror.

It has been argued, by the likes of the apostle Paul and NT Wright, that the point of Deuteronomy is simply to remind us that all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. That, as AJ Jacobs found, it’s simply impossible to keep the Bible literally.

And so the sight of bad behaviour simply leads to our own repentance. That we stop pointing the finger at the bad behaviour of others, we notice the 4 fingers pointing back at us. And we throw ourselves on God’s mercy.

I heard a challenging story this week from a church in Scotland. Of a person in that congregation who’d committed a sin against the church. Perhaps he’d reneged on his marriage vows. Or he’d stolen some money from the church. Or his business had treated a widow badly.

And challenged by God, he stood and repented of this in front of the church.

Only to find the whole church standing and repenting back to him. Telling him that his failure was in part their failure. Their lack of prayer for him. Their lack of encouragement for him in his spiritual life. And together the whole church named their guilt and asked for God’s grace.

And that’s a 5th response to people behaving badly. That we look in the mirror. That we hold the coin, both sides, of God’s love and justice. And we throw ourselves into the arms of God.

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Conclusion

I have tried to apply Deuteronomy to our life today. A book about how to enter and live among people who live differently.

It's a big topic. If you want to keep chewing, I have a handout. 6 page summary What about the Canaanites, which you might find helpful.

And a 8 page summary, How to interpret Deuteronomy today, which others of you might find helpful.

I'm also going to be offering talkback. If something I said wasn't clear, or if you think I missed something, then 5 minutes after the service ends I'll be sitting over there, we can talk.

I started with the story of my nieces. But it could be your story. You in your workplace. You and your neighbours. You as you read the frontpage of the newspaper.

Because we all live among people who behave differently than we do.

And in a nutshell, we have 5 options:

Hide - go live in a cave, stop reading the newspaper, pretend that bad things don't happen

Behave like them - everyone else does it, so why not me

Seek change - work for peace, vote in the elections, speak up for justice

Kill them - join the mayor of Carterton

Look in the mirror - realise that "all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory." Point that verse not others, but back at yourself."

Because if we confess our sins to God, he can always be trusted to forgive us and take our sins away. How are you going to vote today?

Notices: church meeting, Wednesday.

Endorse Judy More in her call to mission work in Puerto Rico, hear from our new worship and youth ministry leaders - update us, introduce Hugh Dimock as community chaplain and explain that role. Also hoping, given some positive meetings between now and Wednesday, to introduce a major new church ministry in the area of families.