

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
LENT 2005
OLD TESTAMENT BASICS I

WHY BOTHER WITH THE OLD TESTAMENT?

Last year I talked about New Testament basics; this year it seemed a good idea to do something similar with the Old Testament. But immediately there is a problem which makes this enterprise rather less straightforward. Everyone assumes that the New Testament is fundamental to Christianity and many Christians find it to be central to their own understanding and living of the faith. But it is not so with the Old Testament. In fact, many people find it very difficult, judging that it portrays a vengeful, violent God who encourages a huge amount of smiting and slaying and isn't much into love and peace and goodwill, a God perhaps at variance with the God and Father of Jesus Christ, or, more generally, with any kind of God they would wish to believe in and commit their lives to. And what about all those obscure laws, obscurer history, and doom-laden prophets? And so on. In other words, you can *assume* the importance of the New Testament, but you have to *argue* for the importance of the Old. And that's why I've called this first talk *Why bother with the Old Testament?*

The need for argument is not new, since the question why bother with the Old Testament is not new. Have you ever heard of a bloke called Marcion? I trust that Kimberly has at any rate. Marcion lived in the second century of the Christian era. The entry for him in the *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* tersely begins: "Marcion, died c.160, heretic". From his base in Rome he organized his own church from the 140s onwards. His central thesis is a recurrent one in the history of the church, and

has its attractions: the Christian gospel is wholly a gospel of love, to the exclusion of any idea of law at all. On this basis he completely rejected the Old Testament, not because he believed it to be untrue or not divinely inspired, but because he believed the God who inspired it to be inferior and unworthy of worship by Christians. In other words, the Old Testament was the scripture of an outmoded religion and its God the God from whose thrall the Gospel had freed humankind. He saw the God of the Old Testament, whom he called the Demiurge, as entirely a God of law who had nothing in common with the God of Jesus Christ. Marcion didn't stop at axing the Old Testament, he also thought that of the New Testament writers only Paul understood the difference between the two Gods – so he got rid of everything in the NT except Paul's letters and an edited version of St Luke! Wow!

Marcion, of course, took his guiding principle far too far and it was a great shock to the church. Before him the Old Testament, assumed to be Holy Scripture, was the taken-for-granted background of all thinking and praying. But after Marcion's assault it became a body of writing that Christians had to attend to deliberately and consciously. Nevertheless that guiding principle, that there is a huge difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of Jesus, is, I suspect, lurking around in most of our minds for at least some of the time. We remain uneasy about many parts of the Old Testament – but then some of us have similar difficulty with parts of the NT too – it is, for example, hard not to be repelled by some of the vindictive passages in Revelation. Be that as it may, the Church in Marcion's day and ever since, has firmly held to the view that the Old Testament is part of Holy Scripture, and so to the view that we are dealing with one God and not two, and I want to spend the rest of this talk making a few suggestions as to why we should agree with the church throughout the ages! I hasten to add that these suggestions are not based on the arguments of Marcion's

day, though perhaps they ought to be. No, they are what I've been able to come up with when I began to think about this, that's all!

First of all, the Old Testament is of *theological* importance to us. From it we derive our belief in God as Creator of all that is and as Lord of human history. From it we derive the monotheistic character of our religion and, so in a curious way, our affirmation of One God in Trinity. Trinity is not, after all, about three Gods. From it we derive our conviction that all human beings are made in the image of God, which is an absolutely fundamental plank in what you might call Christian anthropology. And from it, through the story of Adam and Eve, we derive some pretty inescapable stuff about sin and the human condition. From it also, through the Ten Commandments, and through its portrayal of the holiness and righteousness of God, we derive a faith that makes moral demands upon its adherents. In it we find seminal struggles with the problem of unjustified suffering. I could go on, but I hope the point is clear enough. Christian theology cannot do without the Old Testament.

Second, it is hard to understand *Jesus and the New Testament* without the Old. Jesus himself was steeped in the scriptures of his Jewish faith and engaged very deeply with them. His own beliefs about God are profoundly influenced by these writings. The New Testament writers both allude to them and quote from them on almost every page, for to them they were Holy Scripture, the sacred texts of their faith, and for quite a while the only texts that were so regarded, though from a very early stage the traditions about Jesus, whether oral or written, were accorded fundamental authority too. And the symbolic patterns and ways of thinking about God, humankind and the world that are embedded in the Old Testament are very important in the specifically Christian scriptures, the New Testament, too.

Third, it is hard to conceive of Christian *worship* without the Old Testament, and particularly without the psalms – there will be a whole talk devoted to them later in this series. How many of us keep returning to the psalms for encouragement and nurture? One reason we do this is because they are so extraordinarily varied and because, in keeping with the whole of the Old Testament, they encompass the whole range of human emotions and human approaches to God – love, devotion, lament, anger, manipulation, narrowness of spirit, grief, longing, nobility and baseness..... This means, of course, that they are not always particularly edifying or suitable for those of a nervous disposition! But they are important even for this – as is quite a lot of the Old Testament – as they bring our humanity, warts and all, and utterly without sentimentality, before the Holy One.

Finally, Marcion got it wrong, even if by his refusal to use allegory in interpreting the Old Testament he did disclose how very different a lot of it is from Christian traditions and scriptures. The God we encounter in the Old Testament writings, writings which can vary in date by a thousand years, is many-faceted and not simply to be characterized as some kind of inferior legislator- he is the holy one in our midst, the long suffering and compassionate one, the faithful lover of an errant people, the One whose heart is on fire with love. Some of those facets, of course, are clearly cut in the image of the community – God is made to endorse much that is merely typical of human life – violence, racism, sexism and the like – and we must be willing to recognize that and deal with it accordingly. But this stands as a warning to us not complacently to assume that we never do that ourselves – after all, both British and German churchmen on the eve of World War I preached that God was on their country’s side and it is not very long ago that God was used to endorse apartheid in South Africa. Let he who is without fault and all of that. More positively, the very experience of finding oneself alienated by some of it is perhaps a salutary reminder of the

strangeness and non-domesticity of God – however close God comes to us in Jesus, God remains beyond our grasp, mysteriously and radically other. But it is multi-faceted, and hard to find a point of rest, for as soon as I speak of the God of the Old Testament as mysterious and wholly other (think about Mount Sinai and the giving of the Commandments for example) I must also say that nobody could accuse the Old Testament of making God remote, or bloodless, or unconnected with human experience – the problem is that sometimes God looks almost too uncannily and unpleasantly human! This, I suppose, is what makes the OT work for me – it is such an uneven and challenging landscape. What we have here are the struggles of a community to relate to God and of God to make himself understood in the life of a community. Given the risks and difficulties of that enterprise, on both sides, it is hardly surprising that the record is uneven, and written in many forms and from many perspectives. There is something, actually quite a lot, for everyone, and in the next few weeks I will try to explore some of the different forms and perspectives and to see why they might remain of importance to us.