Another Day, Another Shooting: The Bible and Terrorist Violence

Another day, another shooting. Is nowhere safe? We have to do something about it. But how? And what? How does the Bible speak about the reality of violence?

First, the Bible tells stories about acts of violence. In fact it’s full of stories about violence, from virtually the very beginning. You’re only just outside the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve’s first son is killing their second son. God had warned Eve about how painful it would be for her to have children, and I don’t think God was just talking about the physical pain of giving birth. The greater pain was surely watching one son kill another.

The violence increases through the story until the reason why God decides to send Noah’s flood is that the world is full of violence.

And giving the world a new start after the flood doesn’t make a difference. Later on there’s a great act of mass violence when a foreigner seduces or rapes a girl and two of her brothers kill the entire population of the city.

That’s just Genesis. The book of Judges is full of such violent stories. Christians sometimes express unease about them, as if by telling them the Bible was approving of them, though it makes clear enough that it doesn’t approve of them.

Or maybe the unease is the one implied by something the man who sat next to me at the diocesan convention said on Friday. He’s a hospital chaplain and someone he talked to wanted to know why God hadn’t stopped the San Bernadino killers. She said she couldn’t believe in a God who would let that kind of thing happen. But God didn’t create a world in which we’d be unable to do wicked and stupid things. He gave the world and life over to us for us to live in and to look after on his behalf, and then he weeps like the mother or father of those terrorists over what we do in it. In Genesis God says that Eve will suffer through being a mother, and then Genesis uses the same word when it says that God himself suffers as he watches the world doing what it does.

Jesus comes and he lets the world do its violent worst to him, and that doesn’t make a difference either. There’ll be wars and rumors of wars, Jesus says. Thinkers and politicians in the modern world thought we might be able to abolish violence, to abolish wars. The First World War was the war to end all wars. Jesus is more plausible. There will be wars and rumors of wars. They are an aspect of how the world is. We’d like to think it’s different, but it isn’t. So the Bible tells stories about war and terrorism and violence and invites us to face facts.

Second, the Bible makes rules about violence. In between those stories in Genesis and in Judges are all the laws, the sets of rules for life, in Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and violence is one of their subjects. They don’t make the mistake of telling people to abolish violence, not to make war. You could say that elsewhere the Bible does tell people not to exercise violence. Proverbs declares that vengeance belongs to God, so you don’t take vengeance, and Paul takes up that statement and affirms it. That girl who got seduced or raped had some other brothers, and one of them was Joseph, the man with the technicolor dream coat, and who was also the victim of his brothers’ violence, and later on he has the chance to get his own back, and they assume he’ll take the chance, but he refuses. “Why would I do that?” he asks. He knows that the truly human thing to do, the thing that you do if you have faith in God, is turn the other cheek.

So the Bible has an ideal of non-violence, but it also knows that in reality people will get involved in violence and war, and those sets of rules for life therefore apply themselves to curbing the effects of it, controlling it a bit. Only an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the punishment to fit the crime, not I’ll kill you because you hurt me, which was Lamek’s idea.

There’s a strange rule in the Old Testament about an aspect of something that happens in war. Supposing you fight a war and you win and you capture one of the enemy’s women and you take her home to marry her. If you do that, the rule says, and then you decide you don’t like her, you can’t turn her into your slave. You have to let her go as a free woman.

Now looked at from one angle it’s an inhuman rule. It presupposes you have the right to capture a woman, like that. Shouldn’t it simply tell you not to do it? But the rule is being realistic. That kind of thing happens in war. It’s not use trying to make a law against it. So let’s try to curb the negative results of it. Let’s see whether we can offer the woman some protection.

The Bible models a practicality about war and violence and terrorism. It doesn’t say abolish it. It says do what you can to constrain it.

Third, the Bible thinks about questions about war and violence. It tries to understand them. It analyzes issues. It does it in books like Proverbs and Job and Ecclesiastes and in Paul’s writings in the New Testament. Ecclesiastes is the great repository of realism about the fact that we aren’t going to abolish war. Accept the limits of what you can understand and achieve in that connection and in other connections, Ecclesiastes says.

Here’s an aspect of the question that I’ve been thinking about. Paul reminds the Romans that the existence of imperial authority is a good thing, a God-given thing. It means the authorities can exercise control over the forces of evil and disorder in society. Proverbs likewise talks a bit about kings and the way they work and about the power for good and for bad that they have.

Now those horrible stories in the Book of Judges in the Old Testament end up with a declaration that the problem there was, everybody was doing what they liked because there was no king in Israel. There was no king. Who does it mean by a king? Does it mean a human king? And actually there aren’t so many horrible stories about the time when Israel has got kings. There’s now some social order.

Or does it mean that Israel has been ignoring God as its king? It certainly has been doing that. Given the way Paul talks about God’s authority being exercised via the imperial government, maybe we don’t have to choose. They had no human king and they were ignoring God their king.

Here’s the thing I have been wondering about. We have a problem with violence that nobody else in the world has, and we can’t seem to do anything about it. Why is that? It’s not that we are wickeder than anyone else. But is it because we have a more dysfunctional system of government than more or less anyone else? There are so many checks and balances between president and congress and senate and so much lobbying and wheeling and dealing that no one can do anything. Is that part of our problem? There is no governing authority in our country?

The Bible analyzes issues, and one of its issues is the role of government.

Fourth, in the Bible God’s shares with us his nightmares and his dreams, his warnings and his promises. That’s what he does through the prophets. They say, “If you carry on the way you’re going, this is where you are going to end up.” And its picture of where you’ll end up is often a picture of being overwhelmed by war. That became a reality for Israel within the Old Testament, and you could say it became a reality in Europe in the twentieth century. And maybe we are all paying now for the way the West has related to the Middle Eastern world.

But fortunately the prophets share God’s dreams as well as God’s nightmares, his promises as well as his warnings. Isaiah has a vision of nations flocking to Jerusalem to learn from God, that God will then sort out the issues that divide them, and it will mean they can rework their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. They’ll be free to focus on growing food instead of fighting wars. “Going to lay down my sword and shield down by the riverside, ain’t gonna study war no more.”

The reason why you can face the facts about violence and terrorism and war that appear in the Bible stories and that we watch unfolding on television is that the Bible knows that violence and terrorism and war are not the end of the story. The fact that Jesus was willing to be terrorized and killed, to be a blood-stained victim, but then that he didn’t stay dead but that God raised him from death, is the guarantee that God will fulfill his vision. His dream will become reality. The Bible shares with us God’s nightmares and dreams.

There’s one more thing. Fifthly, the Bible prays about violence. Mostly, it’s what the Psalms do. It’s another reflection of the fact that we may think that we live in violent times, but those guys evidently lived in violent times as well.

I’m tempted to say that it’s the thing they prayed about more than anything else. They knew insecurity, and they prayed about it. They knew what it was like to be under attack, and they prayed about it. They knew fear, and they prayed about it.

They didn’t pray because it would make them feel better. Maybe sometimes it did make them feel better, sometimes it didn’t. But the point about prayer is not to make you feel better. The point about prayer is to urge God to do something. The point about prayer is to lay hold on God to do what you cannot do.

Prayer is fantastically realistic. It starts from the fact that we can’t do anything, and it batters on the chest of the one who can. It starts from the fact that we can’t do anything and it batters on the chest of the one who has shared with us his dream and his vision and it urges him to do what he said he would do.

The *New York Daily News* got steamed up this week about politicians who told people in places like San Bernadino that their prayers were with the community. The paper’s front page screamed, “God Isn’t Fixing This.” We need gun control not calls for prayer, the paper said.

Now I love the paper calling the politicians over that platitude that they express when they say, “Our prayers are with you.” The platitude implies that distorted understanding of prayer, that prayer is designed to make you feel better.

And I’m also glad that the paper called for action, though it’s obviously ironic that we apparently already have as tight gun control as anyone.

But here’s an example of the great way in which in things in general the Bible believes in both-and not either-or. Those sets of rules in Deuteronomy and so on—they imply gun control and other action. But the Psalms also invite prayer. Maybe prayer without rules won’t get us anywhere. Rules without prayer also won’t get us anywhere.

When you watch the news about war and terrorism and violence, you need to remember the Bible’s stories, and work out some equivalent to its rules, and follow it in analyzing the issues, and respond to its nightmares and visions, and join in its prayers.