

BALAAM AND BALAK

A short sermon

Will you spend time with me reflecting on the story we have just heard sung by the choir. It is much shorter than the original which runs to 3 chapters and over 1200 verses.

Well, shall I start with a small group of Syrian refugee families, reaching Dunedin at last, thousands of miles from the ruin that was their home, the desolation that was their country, carrying with them the little they have been able to salvage, arriving in a place where their language is useless, their religion suspect, their way of life unknown.

Or shall I start with 400,000 Rohingya Muslim refugees fleeing across the border from Myanmar into Bangladesh, leaving their dead, their pitiful possessions and their burning homes behind them. The soldiers and Buddhist militia use fire bombs, rifles, land mines; they rape and pillage. Their aim is simple—drive them out, ethnic cleansing.

Or shall I start with a single Hebrew family fleeing into the night from the hideous massacre taking place behind them in Bethlehem: the pitiless, methodical killings by Herod's soldiers, and the sound of bitter weeping, for 'Rachel is crying for her children, refusing to be comforted, for they are dead.' They will cross the Egyptian border to relative safety carrying their baby with them—as Jesus begins life as a member of a refugee family.

Or shall I start where the story of Balaam and Balak begins, with the floggings and the beatings, the intolerable cruelty of 400 hundred years of slavery under the rulers of Egypt; the final flight into the desert, the escape from a pursuing army into a wilderness so barren that the people cry out 'Weren't there enough graves in Egypt? Did you have to bring us out here into the desert to die?'

For the tale of Balaam and Balak is the tale of a refugee people, one of the many legends woven into the epic story of a slave population emerging from 40 years wandering in the desert and reaching haven at last among the wealthy cities, in the green world of Canaan (modern Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel).

And it is a **story**, not a historical document. A story in which God becomes a midnight visitor telling Balaam exactly what he is to say, or chats with him on a hilltop. A **story** in which the same friendly God gives Balaam's donkey the power of speech, so that it can complain, 'Am I not the donkey on which you have ridden all your life? Why have you beaten me these three times?' A **story** with the patterns of such folktales: three beatings, three occasions on which Balaam blesses rather than curses, seven altars on which the king of Moab and Balaam himself each sacrifice a bull and a ram before the prophecy may be made. A **story** which hugely exaggerates the numbers of Hebrews waiting ominously on the borders of Moab—'they are like the dust, there are too many of them to be counted,' (Modern scholars have worked out that if the numbers given in the Book of Numbers are believed, the Israelites formed a vast mob of over 2 million people.) A **story** in which Balaam grandly predicts the future extinction of Israel's enemies by a triumphant Hebrew king and the rise of the victorious new

nation of Israel. 'A king like a bright star will arise; like a comet he will come from Israel. He will conquer his enemies and make their 'and his property and wipe out the last survivors.' So saying, Balaam went back home and Balak went on his way....'

Like all such stories—and this is a very ancient story belonging with the Genesis legends—it carries a meaning (several meanings) deeper than its delightful fairy-tale surface. Let's consider them in turn.

This story says that **everything that happens in human history is the result of the irresistible will of God (or Allah)**. Once God has fingered you for a job there's no escaping (in this respect this story is like the later tale of Jonah). **Is this a sense you or your children carry with you? Is it a good or bad thing that most western people no longer have this sense of their own lives being an expression of a divine order?**

This story says that **we exist in a spirit-filled world**. God has a personal walk-on part in the theatre of history. There are angels among us. Both sides in this story acknowledge that. The King of Moab knows he can't win against the huge numbers of his enemies so he resorts to spiritual warfare—just a pity he didn't count on God turning his secret weapon, the powerful curses of Balaam, against himself. **Have we lost this sense of living in an unfolding sacred narrative: has science taken any such sense away from us to our loss?**

This story says that **the Hebrews are God's chosen people and the land they now occupy is their special, divinely-destined country**. This is a meaning in the story that has given rise to the terrible modern conflicts between Palestinians (heirs of the ancient Canaanites) and Israelis. It is a dark racial element in the story (God is on *my* side, and that's the only side there is); it is also an expression of rock-solid self-confidence. We ignore it at our peril. This story refuses to allow that the tribes facing the invaders might have had the same myths about their ownership of the land. **Do all human beings deeply hold such a sense of sacred right to land? And if some of us don't, can we understand the passion of those who do?**

This story says that **when humanity is on the move it is unstoppable!** Here is a message for Trump and his Mexican Wall, for the Hungarian state with its razor wire barricades, for Britain and its anti-migrant policy, for Australia and its detention centres, for all attempts to shut out and exclude the other person.

And in its own strange way here the story chimes with the affirmation of all the great religions that **it is a sacred obligation to care for and take in the stranger, the refugee, the other person**, for it is God whom we meet in that person.

Here are three fundamental sayings in the Hebrew scriptures, the New Testament and the Qu'ran:

'When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall *love him as yourself*, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.' (Leviticus 19)

The righteous will say, 'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and gave you drink, when did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you, whenever you did this for the least important of these brothers of mine you did it for me.' (Matthew 25)

Worship Allah and to parents do good, and to relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbour, the neighbour farther away, the companion at your side, the traveller... (Qu'ran)

The King of Moab, fearful of the horde of refugees (isn't that a modern phenomenon, too?) rejects the fundamental obligation of refuge and hospitality, but, says the story, no matter how much money he throws at Balaam and despite all the expensive sacrifices he offers to his God, he will be overcome, and the people will pass. It is a message modern New Zealand might well listen to in an age when thousands of refugees and migrants are on the move, and as social inequalities deepen and climate change lifts the level of the oceans many more thousands can be expected.

Walls or welcomes? The choice is ours; it is our nation's choice; it is our world's choice. God willing we will make the right choice. **Amen.**

The righteous will say, 'When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and gave you drink, when did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you, whenever you did this for the least important of these brothers of mine you did it for me.' (Matthew 25)

Worship Allah and to parents do good, and to relatives, orphans, the needy, the near neighbour, the neighbour farther away, the companion at your side, the traveller... (Qu'ran)

The King of Moab, fearful of the horde of refugees (isn't that a modern phenomenon, too?) rejects the fundamental obligation of refuge and hospitality, but, says the story, no matter how much money he throws at Balaam and despite all the expensive sacrifices he offers to his God, he will be overcome, and the people will pass. It is a message modern New Zealand might well listen to in an age when thousands of refugees and migrants are on the move, and as social inequalities deepen and climate change lifts the level of the oceans many more thousands can be expected.

Walls or welcomes? The choice is ours; it is our nation's choice; it is our world's choice. God willing we will make the right choice. **Amen.**