Cup of Wrath

Isaiah 51:17-23

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Many years ago my friend John, or Chinese John as we used to call him was about to get married. A whole bunch of us young men went out to celebrate his stag night – a few weeks before the wedding - I hasten to add. We went out for a few drinks, played 10-pin bowling, and then at around 11pm headed off for a Chinese restaurant. We sat down and ordered our meals – crispy fried duck, spare ribs, stir fried pork, etc. Now, one of his friends had been very naughty and earlier on put a double vodka in one of his drinks, to spice up the evening. What we didn’t realise was that John, being an oriental, had a rather big intolerance to alcohol. Initially he had been very jolly and everything was fine. But during the Chinese meal, he suddenly went very white, shut his eyes, sunk forward and ended up with his face in his plate of half –eaten Chinese. We thought we better get him outside for some air, but he was a dead weight! It ended up with four of us man-handling through the door, poor man. As we went out the door, the waiter said “make sure he pay”!

Two weeks ago, I talked about how, in the Bible, a cup symbolises your fate or destiny. Two cups are commonly talked about – the cup of blessing and the cup of suffering. This week I am going to distinguish a third cup – a cup of judgement or wrath – which is not the same as suffering.

Experiencing God’s judgement is likened to drinking from a cup of strong drink and becoming drunk. It’s the drink that makes you stagger and fall, the cup that makes you embarrass yourself and lose all your senses. My friend was fine in the end after a few glasses of water and a coffee, but the destiny of Israel described in Isaiah is rather worse:

you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord
    the cup of his wrath,
who have drunk to the dregs
    the bowl of staggering.

Then it goes on to describe the Jew’s fate as a double calamity: brought low in humiliation and even worse left alone in your old age without care or guide because your children are lost too. There are many people who feel like that in this world. Those who have lost loved ones, those displaced from the homes due to war and disaster. A cup of wrath, a cup of rebuke from God. In their particular case Judah had been conquered by the Babylonians and they had been carted off into exile, and no doubt many had died along the way.

We have the expression: a bitter pill to swallow and this always leads to the question why? Isn’t God a loving God, full of kindness and mercy, providing for us, sustaining us, blessing us? Why does the Bible even use the words “wrath”, “judgement” and “rebuke”. Not very PC.

The other week Stephen Fry caused a storm by describing God, in an interview this week, as “utterly evil, capricious and monstrous”. Is this the kind of God we worship who explodes in rage as the slightest injury to his pride, who punishes heavily the transgressor?

No it’s not the God I believe in. I believe in a God who is indeed compassionate, merciful and loving. And the fact that we are all living here in peace and security, with many answers to prayers is testament to that. How do we square that with a God who dishes out a cup of wrath to some unfortunates?

The answer is that he is a God of justice. And a God of justice also judges. To make a judgement is to discern, to discriminate between what is good and bad, what is fit and what is unfit, between guilty and innocent. In any walk of life if there is no judgement, then the mediocre, or even the bad eventually wins. Things go to pot.

Judah has been judged and found lacking. They have been warned many times by the prophets. They have set idols before them. They have neglected justice. They have ignored the needs of the poor. “They have denied people justice; the blood of the innocent is on their hands” (Isa 59). As they have denied justice, so they would be judged.

There is a natural thirst for justice in all people, even in small children. I was reading a story a 4 year old girl on her first day at school in America. She got on the school bus with her friend Aiden who was in 5th grade. As soon the bus started the bigger kids at the back started picking on Aiden, teasing him, making fun of his freckles and anything else about him. He tried to ignore it but the older kids were determined to get a reaction and eventually took Aiden’s backpack and threw it out of the window onto the road where it was run over by a passing car. The poor little girl was in total shock, as was Aiden! The only thing they could do was to tell an adult. When they got off the bus Aiden told his mum because she worked at the school. The perpetrators were identified and severely punished. Hurray for justice! What would have happened if they had got away with it? A whole regime of bullying would have taken root.

God is like the adult in the story, who sets things right. The first step is to discriminate – to separate the perpetrators from the innocent. Secondly, the perpetrators receive their fate, their sentence. They have to serve their punishment and then it is over.

Yes God does judge, but in sorrow, he does punish but with hope of change. Love is suspended but only for a while. His judgement is not vindictive but corrective. And God’s justice is fair. Let’s face it we as human beings are always doing wrong things which need putting right – which need judging.

The Jews had committed grave injustices in their treatment of the innocent, of the poor and in their treatment of God himself. After years of patiently waiting for them to listen to the message of the prophets, it seems that God could wait no longer. The whole edifice of Jewish society was rotten and so easy pickings for the Babylonian invaders. God seems to leave them to their fate, to drink the cup of judgement to the dregs and be taken away from their land to a place of exile. But only for a while.

For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favour lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning. Ps 30:5

In the end of the passage, Judah’s oppressors get their turn. *They* get judged for how they have treated the Jews.

‘See, I have taken out of your hand
    the cup that made you stagger;
from that cup, the goblet of my wrath,
    you will never drink again.
**23**I will put it into the hands of your tormentors,
    who said to you,
    “Fall prostrate that we may walk on you.”’

God is not partial. He is patient and he is even handed. Injustice will eventually receive it’s fate, it’s dues. Those who torment, bully and oppress will at some point receive a cup of judgement which will be a bitter drink to swallow. But then it will be over.

So if you are suffering at the hands of bullies, tormentors, or oppressors, take heart. You may have to be patient, but God’s judgement will fall on the end on those people who are tormenting you. He has noticed, and He will do something about it in the end. Secondly if you are someone who feels you are under judgement also take heart that God is wanting to change you, to restore you and in his anger he will remember mercy.

Amen.