

The LORD is a jealous and avenging God;
the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with anger.
The LORD takes vengeance on his foes
and keeps his anger burning against his enemies. ...
The mountains shake before him
and the hills melt away.
The earth trembles at his presence,
the world and all who live in it.
Who can withstand his indignation?
Who can endure his fierce anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire;
the rocks are shattered before him. ...
he will make an end of Nineveh;
he will pursue them into darkness.

With these horrifying words, the book of the prophet Nahum begins. And what terrible words they are! They paint for us the picture of a God filled with anger and rage; one who destroys the mountains about us and makes even the entire earth shake to its core. Once before, the bible stories say, the anger and despair of God became so great that the earth was flooded over, drowning all living creatures. Here, Nahum paints the picture of the terrible rage and anger of God which once more will pour out on creation like an incredible fountain of fire, destroying all things before it, until even the mountains melt and the very rocks themselves are shattered into pieces.

A few weeks ago, Australia experienced a small taste of this type of destruction, when great bushfires swept through the country destroying entire towns as they went. One couple, trapped by the flames and with no way to escape, held each other in their arms and waited for death to come. Later, when the police were searching through the destruction, they found what they thought was only one skeleton ... but with two skulls – the heat of the fire had been so great that it had fused the couple's bones together. The fire that was poured out on Australia was so intense that it even turned the wheels of cars into rivers of metal. But even such a tremendous fire does not compare to the heat and fury of the creation-destroying anger of this vengeful God. Can there possibly be any salvation before such tremendous divine rage? Can there be any place to hide? In a world consumed by fire, even a wooden ark is useless.

Given this horrific image of God's anger and rage, it is not surprising that in the time of the early church, some were absolutely certain that the Jews must have been worshipping a different God than the one revealed in Jesus. In this introduction, Nahum shows us not a life-giving creator God but one who robs life and destroys creation; not a loving, suffering God but one whose anger and rage floods over the earth and melts the world away.

Nahum paints a picture here of a YHWH who looks incredibly like the Hindu god Shiva: Shiva the destroyer and bringer of death.

Despite all these images of horror, Nahum's own anger and rage, and his proclamation of divine terror is not aimed at the whole world but is focussed very specifically on one object, one empire, one city: Nineveh.

As the capital of the Assyrian empire, Nineveh (in what is now modern Iraq) represented all that was hated by Israel: an immense superpower that dominated the entire region, a force that oppressed the countries and nations around it, robbed them of their resources and enslaved their people. For Israel this was especially unbearable. Weren't *they* God's chosen people? Weren't they special?

Daniel, a Jewish friend of mine, once expressed this frustration to me: 'We', he said, 'WE are God's chosen people, WE are the ones elected through Abraham, but you Arabs, you get the land, you get the oil, you get the riches. And what is the only thing we get that makes us special? Circumcision.'

For centuries Israel had convinced itself that it was the special one, the one who, like Joseph and his 11 brothers, was most-loved by the Father, the tallest bundle of grain to which all others would bow down, the one to whom even the sun and moon and stars would bow down, the one child who would be given special favour by the Father (Gen 37). Israel had convinced itself that God was her God: that even if she was unfaithful and went off whoring after other gods, that YHWH would always be the eternally faithful bridegroom, the one who saves his heart and his love for Israel, his bride (Hosea). So how could Nineveh become so powerful? How could Assyria grow into a great empire that dominated and threatened tiny Israel? How could this injustice be allowed to stand? Surely the children of Israel are the ones who are good, the ones who are blessed, the ones unjustly oppressed. Surely the Assyrians are the evil ones, the ones who bring suffering to God's beloved bride. Yet doesn't God stand with the weak? Doesn't God defend the oppressed?

It is not that Israel hadn't tried already on its own: Israel is experienced in warfare, it has its own armies, its own military forces which battle and fight against its neighbours. But compared to the imperial might of this Assyrian superpower, how can the tiny Israel possibly succeed? It is a small and insignificant country, trying to maintain its status as an independent nation in the face of an empire set on expanding its borders and crushing any and all opposition. Nahum knows Israel has no chance of survival on its own; it's military is outnumbered, its forces are too weak. Instead, Nahum, like so many Israelites before and after him, knows their country's only hope lies in summoning the almighty power of God to do what Israel itself is powerless to do: to utterly destroy its enemy, burying them forever in darkness beneath the desert sands. Nahum, like Joel and almost all the other minor prophets, turns Israel's eyes to the long-awaited so-called 'Day of the Lord', that one day when YHWH will call all the nations to account for their injustices against God's favourite child, God's beloved bride, his special, chosen people. Finally, on that day, God will defend those who are good, and in his anger and fury he will unleash his revenge against all those others who are evil, against Israel's enemies, and they will be wiped from the earth. Not even the children will be spared: Nineveh will have no descendants left to bear its name (v.14). On that day, the favourite son will stand by himself in an ocean of blood, surrounded by the bodies of his enemies, and he will finally be alone with the father and enjoy the Father's exclusive love.

REALLY??

Is this really how we are to understand God? Is this really how we are to understand ourselves: as God's favourites, as the only ones who are good, pure and just? Do we as Christians really write ourselves into this story, into this hope for the slaughter of all our enemies?

I mentioned that among all the 12 minor prophets at the end of the Old Testament, almost all draw upon the 'Day of the Lord' tradition seen so strongly in Joel and Nahum. But one prophet's story stands radically opposed to this idea; one prophet must face the hated Assyrian empire and learn humility and love. A word of the Lord regarding Nineveh, regarding this horrific enemy, had also come to another: it had come to Jonah.

We all know the story so well: Jonah is given the task of taking God's message of redemption to Nineveh, to convince them to turn from their sins. But like his fellow Jewish prophets, the last thing Jonah wants is to expose the enemy to God's grace and salvation. Isn't it simple and straightforward enough? They are evil! They are Israel's persecutors and oppressors! Israel is good! What is God thinking? Does God not know what he is supposed to do? He must destroy them, kill them, slaughter them, pour out the fire of his rage and revenge upon them all. Either God is with us or against us, and WE are the chosen ones, WE are God's special people. The line between good and evil is clear: it runs around the borders of Israel — and Assyria is on the wrong side.

So Jonah runs away. But storm and sea cannot separate him from the will of God. In despair he chooses what was for the Jewish mind the most horrific death: drowning. But using a great whale God drags him from the depths of the sea. Even death is denied to him! Resigned to his fate, Jonah carries the word of God to the enemy — and his worst nightmare comes true: the hated and brutal Assyrians tear their clothes, weep — and repent. Israel had written them off as evil, yet they are actually morally responsive. Lost and confused, Jonah offers up his deepest cry to God: 'LORD, take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live' (Jonah 4:3).

In its own way, Jonah's story is also a story of divine anger — though not for Nineveh. The anger and rejection are aimed at Jonah himself, as well as at all of Israel, whom Jonah represents. God's response to Jonah's wish comes quickly, and even comes twice. But it is full of accusation against Israel: *'What right do you have to be angry?'* What right do you have to judge and condemn others? Yes God is Israel's God, yet isn't he also the God of the oppressor, God of the enemy? Isn't he indeed God of *all* people, *all* nations, *all* countries, *all* creation? God refuses Israel's and Jonah's wish to act as judge over Nineveh, to pour out his rage and wrath against them. Instead he acts towards the Ninevites primarily as what he is: namely their creator, their sustainer, their loving and forgiving God. 'What right do you have to be angry', to demand the divine slaughter of God's lost children?

How easy it is for us to read Nahum and immediately align ourselves with Israel. After all, aren't we also a small country caught between and threatened by large empires? Aren't we also a small faith community living among a nation of non-believers? And after all, isn't it just human nature to dream of and rejoice in the defeat of our enemies; to see

ourselves as the only ones who are good; to divide the world neatly into those who are good and those who are evil; and to think that if we can just destroy all those who are bad, all those who are against us, then our lives will finally be perfect? How easy it would be for us to read Nahum's words and to cry to God, to desire to tap into that divine power and demand that God destroy our enemies, demand the slaughter of the ones who oppress us, the death of those who threaten us, just as Nahum dreamed of the violent destruction of those who threatened Israel.

But we are not Israel. Instead, we are the followers of the one Israel rejected, the one Israel crucified because of his love for all people, even the Gentiles: the one who commanded us to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute and threaten us, to do good to those who hate us, and to bless those who oppress us. We are disciples of the one who, when nailed to the cross and tortured by his enemies, could have called down from heaven the burning wrath and vengeance of God – but refused.

Reflecting on his time in prison as an opponent of the Russian communists, Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote, 'Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts.' The idea was new to Solzhenitsyn, but it has been an insight of the church for thousands of years.

It is so easy for us to divide the world into those who are good and those who are evil, and then long for the destruction of our enemies. But the message of Jesus Christ is one of honesty and humility: in honesty to admit that we are all sinners, and in humility to accept that even though we, and all human beings, are sinners, Christ still loves us all. My prayer for us is that God give us the strength to learn not to hate those that Christ loves, those for whom Christ died: those who are sinners just like us.