

ON RELIGION AND VIOLENCE¹

A sermon preached by Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Third Sunday after Epiphany, 21 January 2024

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God ...

We know that Mark's gospel is very direct. He cuts to the chase immediately. No birth narratives or attempts to establish a genealogy for Jesus. Did he know about them and reject them? We don't know. He begins his gospel with John the Baptist and, when John disappears into prison, never to emerge, he presents Jesus beginning his ministry.

The simple phrase "after John was arrested", opens for us a small window into what was a world of violence and oppression. Mark concludes the story of John in chapter 6:14-29 when he gives an extended account of his imprisonment and beheading at the hands of the Roman puppet, Herod Antipas.

Why would we be surprised? To be frank, biblical history is one of murder, violence, war, atrocities, and violent oppression, very much like today, which at least gives it human integrity. Nothing is hidden. More particularly, most of the fighting recounted in both the Old Testament and the Apocrypha is about the control of the area we know as the Holy Land.

This conflict has continued to today as the forces of Islam swept through in the Middle Ages; as the Crusaders sought to recover the area for Christianity. In World War I, the allies swept away the Ottoman Empire, in actions including the astounding cavalry charge by the Australian Light Horse at Beersheba. After World War II, the state of Israel was established to provide a homeland for Jews after the horrors of the Holocaust. Just as in biblical times, the land was not empty, and conflict has continued. We have consistently failed to resolve the problems created by the response to an earlier catastrophe.

This brief account does no justice to the complicated interactions of the Middle East, and this is not a history lecture, even if I were qualified to deliver one, which I am not. I turn instead to the story of Abraham and his children. In Genesis 17, God is recorded as saying to Abraham:

I will give to you, and your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding, and I will be their God.²

In general, the land of Canaan refers to an area stretching from southern Lebanon and Syria to the Egyptian border and including Israel, Gaza, the West Bank and Jordan.

Who are the offspring of Abraham? Genesis tells us that, by their old age, Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless. Sarah arranged for Abraham to have a child by her enslaved Egyptian maid, Hagar. This arrangement gave Abraham his first son, Ishmael. Then Sarah became pregnant and produced Isaac, a second son for Abraham. Traditionally, Ishmael is regarded as the ancestor of the Arabs, while Isaac is the ancestor of the Hebrews.

¹ Readings: Jonah 3:1-10; Psalm 65:1-10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

² Genesis 17:8

It is not for me to comment here on how the Hebrew scriptures and the Holy Koran treat these stories. What is important for us to know is how deep within the Jewish and Islamic traditions the land of Canaan and its possession lie.

Next, it is important for us to understand how we see the history, coming, as we do, from the Hebrew scriptures. Hagar is mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Galatians.³ He makes an allegory of the Genesis story, regarding Christians as the children of the free Sarah, and rejecting Jerusalem as the children of the enslaved Hagar. In this way, we have inherited an anti-Jewish prejudice, anti-Jerusalem, and some of us have assumed ourselves to be Abraham's true children. Of course, Islam did not exist in Paul's time, but an online search will reveal sites using Galatians 4 to attack Islam. Paul intended none of these consequences.⁴ His concern was about the fulness of Christian citizenship in the kingdom of God, not about the exclusion of others.

I come now, with some trepidation, to the current situation in Israel and Gaza. I must first make some distinctions: between Jews and the State of Israel; between Muslims and Hamas; and between Christians and the historically Christian western nations. But, although this distinction is important and even necessary, it is far from clear. Neither the political organisations nor the religious groups are entirely separated, nor do they present unified views. Jews are divided in their approach to Israel as a state. Israeli citizens take different views. Muslims, both within and without Gaza, are divided about Hamas. Some support and others reject. Christians are divided in their attitudes to both the actions of inherently Christian countries and towards the behaviour of the other two faiths. And we need to note, the Christians of Israel and Gaza are Palestinians. Both nation states and religious groups pursue other agendas alongside their concern for peace.

Although, as Mark notes, Jesus came into John the Baptist's world marked by violence and oppression, he came to proclaim the good news. Where is it in today's world where we see the Abrahamic faiths involved in ongoing conflict? Where is the good news? Where is the good news for Evelyn Ann, whom we will soon baptize? I understand her situation well. I was baptized on Christmas Eve in 1939, just three months into World War II. This question could have been asked for me.

In a recent article for the Australian Jesuit online magazine *Eureka Street*,⁵ Alan Dowty notes how extremists on both sides have, over a long period, derailed sensible progress towards a two-state solution. Credible alternative political leaders need to be found in both Israel and Palestine. Some of the good news is to be found in resisting extremist positions wherever we find them.

The Christmas issue of the English Catholic weekly, *The Tablet*, wrote its editorial about the current conflict. It began by identifying hope as the most easily ignored theological virtue. I must confess that my reaction to current events is, frequently, hopelessness. The way through this hopeless feeling is, *The Tablet* suggests, St Augustine's vision of the two cities, the City of God, and the Earthly City. The two cities go side by side and it is the Incarnation at Christmas that links them.

³ Galatians 4:21-31.

⁴ See Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Galatians*, Brazos Press, 2023, pp.99-131 for a comprehensive account of this chapter.

⁵ [Best of 2023: The Israel-Hamas War in perspective \(eurekastreet.com.au\)](https://eurekastreet.com.au/best-of-2023-the-israel-hamas-war-in-perspective)

Key moments in salvation history are not always visible from the perspective of the earthly city. Such key moments include every time Mass is celebrated; every act of mercy, from consoling mourners to relieving the starving and clothing the naked. ... Thus can the ways of the City of God seep through into the Earthly City ...⁶

In the same issue, David Neuhaus, an Israeli Jew, who was adopted into a Muslim Palestinian family and who, now ordained as a Jesuit priest, living and teaching in Jerusalem, said:

In my ... search for ... words, I ask three women whom I have never met to help me. Yocheved Lipschitz is an 85-year-old Jewish Israeli peace activist, dragged from her home in Kibbutz Nir Oz into the Gaza Strip as a hostage, released after 17 days, and now active in the struggle for the release of the remaining hostages, among whom is her own husband. Suha Saqallah is a Muslim Palestinian grandmother, who lost most of her family in the Israeli bombardments of Gaza, and now watches alone over her newborn granddaughter Maryam, struggling for life in an incubator. Ilham Farah was an 84-year-old Christian Palestinian, a church organist and pianist, shot by an Israeli sniper and left to bleed to death in the streets of Gaza. My words must be able to do each one of them justice as I strive to hear what they might whisper to me about what is happening in Israel/Palestine today.⁷

I am not arguing here that a solution to every problem can easily be found if we are good, or nice, or, even, good listeners. Many, most, of our problems are beyond our personal control. The forces are too large, whatever we do. Neither are solutions found by simple application of biblical texts. But that does not lead us to helplessness or passive acceptance. It leads us to hope. As Andrew McGowan has noted, the answer does not lie in the progress of human history, but in a person, Jesus.⁸

I was glad when they said to me,
‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’
Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
‘May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.’
For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good.⁹

Giver of peace,
teach us to see ourselves
in the face of the Other,
that we may learn to be
patient with fault
generous with love
sparing with anger.

⁶ “A new heaven and a new earth”, *The Tablet*, 23/30 December 2023, p. 2

⁷ [Israel-Palestine conflict: What can I say? \(thetablet.co.uk\)](https://thetablet.co.uk)

⁸ [The Call of the Holy One - by Andrew McGowan \(substack.com\)](https://substack.com)

⁹ Psalm 122

Help us to understand
that our little lives
are potent with great good,
that we are healers in Your image,
that reaching out in need of You
to

others more in need,
we find You near.

Give us the grace
simply to be kind.

Then peace must surely come
to dwell among us.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Oseh Shalom* Barbara D. Holender, [Oseh Shalom—a poem by Barbara D. Holender | The Jewish Pluralist](#)



Sarah Leading Hagar to Abraham

Caspar Netscher (Prague or Heidelberg ca. 1639 – 1684 The Hague)



Hagar and her son Ishmael in the desert (1819) by François-Joseph Navez



Isaac and Ishmael together again: a message of hope¹¹

¹¹ [Isaac and Ishmael, Together Again: A Message of Hope \(bobcornwall.com\)](http://bobcornwall.com)