

# The Bible, the Trinity, and the War

*A sermon by Nathan Nettleton, 26 May 2024*

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## Message

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us how to take sides when the Bible brings us conflicting voices, especially over persistent issues like ethno-nationalism, racism, war, and genocide.

## Sermon

Three weeks ago when I preached a sermon addressing the current national conversation about domestic violence, I began by commenting that it was one of my fairly rare departures from my usual practice of grounding my sermon in one of our Bible readings for the day. I'm doing it again today. I have something I want to talk about which doesn't really have anything to do with today's readings.

But, in fact, today the church calendar itself does something a little different. Today, being the first Sunday after last week's Feast of Pentecost, is called Trinity Sunday, and it invites preachers to give their attention to the doctrine of the Trinity rather than just to the readings. My sermon today is not born out of a reflection on the Trinity either, but as I've considered what I wanted to say, I began to see that our understanding of God as Trinity is quite relevant, so I will give it some attention.

What I actually wanted to talk about is how we respond when the Bible makes us cringe, and how that's been happening a lot more lately because of Israel's attacks on Gaza. So I'll get back to the Trinity in the course of exploring this question, but what are we to make of it when the Bible says things that are horrific and immoral, or even just embarrassing and cringe-worthy?

I've lost count of the number of times I've heard some of you in this congregation make comments after a troubling Bible reading in our daily prayer liturgies, saying things like "Well, what are we supposed to make of that?" or "How are we supposed to deal with that if the Bible is supposed to be the Word of God?"

Those comments and questions have become more frequent and more urgent since last October because so much of the Bible expresses unquestioning support for Israel and portrays opposition to Israel as opposition to God and, as the evidence has mounted that Israel has been practicing apartheid and is now committing large scale war crimes and crimes against humanity, it becomes harder and harder to hear those passages of scripture without wanting to protest and ask tough questions.

Last weekend, some misguided Christians organised a rally in Melbourne to protest against anti-semitism and express solidarity with Jews who are being unfairly persecuted. In the right context, that's a cause I could absolutely support, but in the current context, to shout about those things without saying anything at all about islamaphobia or the suffering of Palestinians will absolutely inevitably be seen as taking sides. And sure enough, the media coverage of the rally simply identified it as a pro-Israel rally. If the organisers didn't see that coming, they were breathtakingly naive. I suspect they saw it coming, and were okay with it.

Their publicity material included a series of Bible quotes to justify the call to stand in support of Israel. They said:

Christians must stand for Israel and God's people (Romans 11:1-2, Joel 3:2), He has called the nations to stand with Israel (Isaiah 49:22) and comfort God's people (Isaiah 40:1), reflecting His unfailing love (Isaiah 54:10) for His treasured possession Israel (Deuteronomy 7:6) the apple of His eye (Zechariah 2:8).

Now even that list probably sounds problematic enough in today's context, and it is, but of course when we read our Bibles thoroughly, it gets far worse than that. There are passages that describe Israeli forces slaughtering civilians – men, women and children – and it specifically says that they did that because God commanded them to do so. There are even passages that say that God condemned certain Israeli kings and military commanders for failing to be sufficiently thorough in their genocidal campaigns and not finishing the job, leaving some survivors. And these passages are absolutely relevant to the current conflict because there are extremist ultra-orthodox voices in Israel now who are invoking those passages as a Biblical mandate to “finish the job” which was not finished in ancient Biblical times or during the occupation of Palestine in 1948.

There's lots of other horrific stuff too, not just the stuff that we are alerted to by the current war. There are commands to execute LGBT people, adulterers, and even rebellious children. There are racial supremacist passages that encourage Jewish men to divorce their non-Jewish wives and banish them and their children into the desert. There's slavery, misogyny, terrorism, child abuse, and every war crime imaginable, all either endorsed or at least tolerated. What, indeed, are we to do with all this when it comes to us as part of our sacred scriptures?

In some ways, though, I feel like I've been failing a bit as a preacher, because I've addressed these questions numerous times over the past thirty years, but I still hear the same confused questions, “How can this stuff be the Word of God?”

So let me spell something out really clearly before I unpack it and explain. I understand that many of you were brought up with the belief that the Bible is the Word of God, full stop. Not just the Bible as a whole, but every line in the Bible is the Word of God, no correspondence will be entered into. If it is really important to you to hang onto the belief that every line in the Bible is unequivocally the Word of God, then you need to get yourself a new pastor, because I do not believe that.

The Bible is not the Word of God in any absolute unqualified sense. Jesus the Christ is THE Word of God. Even the Bible says that. It does not say that Jesus is A Word of God alongside the Bible which is the other Word of God. No, it says Jesus is THE Word of God. Period. I believe that, absolutely. Jesus is THE Word of God; the Bible is not.

That does not mean that the Bible is useless or unimportant, but it does mean that you will be on the wrong track if you simply read every line of it as equally God's command to you to be followed exactly as written. In fact, if you obey every line of it equally, you'll quite quickly end up in jail. And that's the problem, isn't it? The Bible contains a lot of material that praises behaviour which we now regard as immoral and illegal. Including, in the context of today's Gaza conflict, the Bible contains lines which praise things we now regard as war crimes.

If you are thinking that we, in our liturgies, daily label the Bible as the Word of God, let me explain a subtle distinction. I acknowledge that it is subtle and therefore easily overlooked, but it is nevertheless important.

When we introduce our Bible readings, we don't say "Let us listen TO the Word of God," we say "Let us listen FOR the Word of God." The former would indeed imply that the Bible is the Word of God, and we are listening to it as such. But "listen FOR the Word of God" is acknowledging that Jesus is the Word of God, and that as we listen to the Bible being read, we are listening for Jesus to speak to us now in our encounter with these ancient texts. Maybe it is too subtle and should be made more explicit, but that's what it's saying.

The thing is that reading the Bible is a sacramental action. The Bible is not a simple letter or instruction manual from God that anyone can read by themselves and know exactly what God wants of them in every circumstance. But the Bible is something that God has promised to speak to us through. Like all sacraments though, this is essentially something that happens in community. Jesus has promised that where two or three gather in his name, he will be there in our midst, and that promise links up with various sacramental actions which he has especially promised to be present in. So as we, as a community, gather around the Bible to read it and listen to it and to discuss and interpret it together, Jesus again fulfils that promise to be present in our midst, speaking to us and through us. That still won't make every line of the Bible the Word of God, but the Word of God will emerge among us in our reading and listening and discussing and interpreting.

Now saying that there are many many lines in the Bible that cannot on their own be the Word of God, because they are hateful, immoral and horrific, does not mean that those lines are of no value and should be deleted or suppressed. Those things accurately record how people used to understand God and what they used to believe God was saying to them, and often it is important to understand a previous worldview in order to be able to properly understand the direction in which God's Spirit is now leading us. The direction is much easier to discern if you can see where it has come from.

Jesus was quite explicit about this. In his sermon on the mount he repeatedly framed his teachings by saying "You have heard that it was said ... , but I say to you ... " The first part was something the Bible had taught, and the second part was what Jesus was now teaching us instead.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

The radical nature of the all-inclusive love that Jesus is calling us to can only be fully understood when it is juxtaposed against the culture into which he was speaking with its ethnic-supremacism, its slavery, its misogyny, and its violent hostility towards outsiders and misfits.

We understand this dynamic in other areas. For example, one of the reasons that the truth-telling work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission and other similar ventures is so important is that we can't adequately understand what is needed in our relationship with First-nations

peoples in the country if we don't understand the horrors that have been part of that relationship in the not-so-distant past. The pathway towards a better future is very difficult to discern if we can't see what direction it has come from. The same thing is happening within the pages of the Bible. Horrific misunderstandings of God are preserved to enable us to better comprehend the radical extent of the change Jesus is calling us to.

So, what does any of this have to do with the doctrine of the Trinity? Well, the doctrine of the Trinity refutes the idea that God is some kind of good cop–bad cop routine. It's not nasty angry God the Father and meek and mild Jesus the Christ and strange Holy Spirit who wafts around inspiring nutcases. The doctrine of the Trinity alerts us to the likelihood that those images of a violent genocidal God who hated the first nations of Palestine are simply wrong rather than being evidence of a god who is terrifyingly inconsistent and fails to live up to the standards he demands of us. The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that there is only one God, and that everything we need to know about what God is like has been revealed to us in Jesus. Jesus may not be all there is of God, but all that there is of God is just like Jesus.

And because all that there is of God is just like Jesus, when we gather around the Bible to listen and learn, we read it through the experience of Jesus. We weigh the message of each line by its conformity to the radical love, love and more love message of Jesus. This is named in the gospel according to Luke where it tells us that the risen Jesus opens the minds of his disciples to understand the scriptures (Luke 24:45), and interprets to them the things about himself in all the scriptures, beginning with Moses and all the prophets (Luke 24:27).

The Bible is not the last will and testament of our dearly departed God that a bereaved community now has to follow to the letter in order to be faithful to the memory of a dead God. It is treated that way by far too many people, often out of ignorance, but sometimes out of malevolence.

The God we encounter in Jesus does not lay down the law and then walk away. The God we encounter in Jesus reaches out to us through bread and wine and water and word, and invites us into the unfolding story of God's love. Just as Jesus was not afraid to live among us in our messiness and brokenness, in all our sin and failure, so Jesus is not afraid to become present to us in the midst of our encounter with a messy and fractured collection of writings from other broken and sinful people who were groping their way towards a right understanding of God. It is in the midst of all that mess and failure and wrong-headedness that Jesus meets us and gathers us into the story as it continues to evolve towards the full revelation and full experience of God's crazy, liberating, all-forgiving love.

So please don't let me hear any more of this "If the Bible is supposed to be the Word of God" stuff. It's not. Jesus is the Word of God. But in conversation with the Bible and with our risen Lord who opens our minds, we are supposed to become the latest embodiment of the Word of God. Not the Bible, us!