

Revelation 14:6-13

Warning God

What do you think of bad language? I don't mean using the name of God or Jesus, but swearing in general? Walk down the street and it's every other word in some people's mouths. Go to a film or watch TV and it's fairly evenly spread about. The Bible doesn't say much except in a couple of places, "**not to let unwholesome talk come out of your mouth**" and to "**let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt**" (Col 3:8, 4:6; Eph 5:4). And then there's Proverbs 13:3 "**whoever guards their lips guards their soul**" - in other words, there is actually an interplay between the inside and outside: what we enunciate partly defines for us who we are.

As Christians, therefore we should avoid bad language because in general its offensive to others (that's why it's called "bad" language), and it also moulds the way we are. However, the fact that the Bible says so little about it suggests that swearing can't be a sin of the highest order, and probably there are times when most of us do do it. Crude words express unbridled emotion and sometimes it seems necessary to release it in that way. One of the things about bad language is that it's rarely meant literally. If someone tells you to "F-off", they're not usually wishing upon you the delights of sexual intercourse. If they call you "a filthy swine", they don't mean you have four trotters and a load of muck on your face. This kind of language conveys something very different to the literal meaning of the words.

When God Uses Bad Language

The reason I'm asking you to think about all of this is that parts of the Bible in which I think you could say that God uses bad language. It's not the kind of profanities we might use to vent our spleen, but it is strong language, designed to shock - even to offend. The example that always comes to mind for me is in a number of OT prophets where God rails against nations he describes as adulterous women: he's going to throw them down under the spreading tree of their adultery, fling their skirts over their heads, and expose their nakedness for all to see. Now this is bad language: deliberately shocking, violent, crude, brute, deeply offensive, and particularly so to women who are portrayed unambiguously as the transgressor - yet the whole thing is completely metaphorical.

This kind of Biblical Bad Language has a lot to answer for when it comes to the way that patriarchal churches and cultures have used it, and we see something similar here in Revelation where the female images are split between pure white virginal bride and wanton whore without regard for anyone. This is bad language - especially for women - but our task is to understand the purpose and message behind these metaphors.

What are we to make of this language? What does it mean? Is it true?

Three Angels

That passage we're looking at tonight speaks of three angels - messengers from God - "**flying in mid-air**" (v.6) You might ask, "where else do angels fly?" But the phrase means "high up so that everyone can see." This is like those advertising planes you see flying along the coast at the seaside telling everyone whatever it is they have on the banner trailing behind.

The First Angel: Worship God

The First Angel announces "**the eternal gospel**" which is summarised in a command to worship God because his judgement is imminent, (v.7). Where's the Good News in that, you might ask - well it's implied: there is still time to repent, still time to turn, and God *will* accept the worship of anyone who truly turns to him. The meaning and truth of this part is fairly straightforward to understand.

The Second Angel: Babylon is Fallen

The Second Angel proclaims the demise of the blasphemous Empire - here named as Babylon, but of course standing for all those surging pretenders to divine authority. In John's day, Babylon was Rome - and with good reason: both were world empires, both captured Jerusalem, both destroyed the Temple, and both required worship to be given publicly to their own emperors. This was seen by Jew and Christian alike as deliberately and arrogantly offensive.

But the Second Angel also shows the destructive intent of this avaricious self-engorging power: "**it made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries**" - and here we're beginning to hit some of the bad language for which Revelation's known: "Babylon the Great, later described as a harlot" - she "**makes**" all the people drink her maddening wine. All the responsibility for sin - in this isolated image is placed on the prostitute - although in the very next verse we can see that it's clearly shared. Now, in the gospels we see Jesus well aware of the moral subtleties and social pressures surrounding prostitution. He never joined with that male-ist bullying and rejecting revulsion - which of course, is nothing more than revulsion of what we fear in ourselves. Yet here, through the imagination of John, God's Spirit allows such "bad language" - using stereotypical, male-dominated, almost violent imagery to convey not only the beastliness of this Babylon, but also to convey the deep repugnance of God in response to its actions.

Why?

Well God uses bad language because God is provoked. It's almost as if he's saying, "what you've done and are doing, really brings out the worst in me; it **powerfully provokes** me to see you in this way. I know that prostitution doesn't define anyone's person, but it symbolises an unfaithfulness among humans towards your creator, and that unfaithfulness is what I see so magnified right now."

Well, that's an interpretation if ever there was one - but I don't think it's far wrong. We *have* to try to understand why God talks in this way. Fundamentalist readings of Revelation, in my limited experience, tend to make matters worse. But many *revisionist* readings are unsatisfactory. A recent essay by Alison Jack surveys the richness of Revelation as a source for feminist theology. But in her concluding sentence she says, "*However, whether a purely feminist reading gets to the heart of the text is another matter.*" (*Studies in the Book of Revelation - Moyise*).

Well, that's an interpretation if ever there was one - but I don't think it's far wrong. We *have* to try to understand why God talks in this way. Then we have the third angel - and things get worse.

The Third Angel: God's Judgement Will Come

The Third Angel warns that those who drank the wine of Babylon's debauchery will therefore "**drink the wine of God's fury.**" (v.10) Now this is beginning to get nasty. What kind of an image is that - "drinking the wine of God's fury"? The picture I'm imagining looks like something from a horror film, yet it's our God - worshipped and loved, who seems to be forcing this poison down. What's this bad language about?

Obviously it's related to the action of drinking the poisoned wine of Babylon - they drank it without realising that they were actually doing something far more serious. They thought they were drinking a poison that merely affected them for this life, but actually it had consequences far beyond: They are "**drinking the cup of God's fury which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath.**" John uses this horrific imagery to make the connection between this world and the next all too clear. Hosea had said something similar: "**they have sown the wind and they shall reap the whirlwind.**" (Hosea 8:7)

That's what it means, but is it true? "Is what true?" we have to ask. Is it true that God's going to force people to drink from some intoxicating, poisonous cup? No - of course not. So why use this violent image? Is it true that God feels anger, and that his anger might be acted upon? Yes - it is. How can God *not* be angry when his beautiful creation's trashed and abused?

How can God *not* be angry when people he has made give themselves to false deities? You may start arguing, "But it wasn't their fault!" Yet to understand these parts of Revelation you have to stay with the message of the moment: something intended good is repeatedly being spoiled - again and again - and the one who made it is furious. Have you ever tried to make something that just keeps on going wrong? That's frustrating. But what if someone else keeps spoiling it. Then you get angry.

God the Torturer?

But the bad language is unrelenting - and it gets worse still. I pointed out earlier the blame laid on Babylon the whore, but here it turns out to be shared. Whoever has worshipped the beast and received his mark, we read, "**will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever.**" (vv.10b-11a) So again let's ask: "What does it mean and is it true?"

There's no question that this word "torment" means "torture". It could be torture to extract a confession or it could be simply the miserable abusive torture done by bullying prison guards. Sulphur was effective in ancient warfare because of its low melting point - just 112° - and because it sticks horribly to the skin - so it was used defensively in a siege, or offensively with catapults. Why is God's Spirit mingling with John's most unbridled imagination to produce this most violent and offensive of images? Can God really be endorsing this behaviour?

Clearly the ingredients of this image were already part of John's known world, as indeed they would have been found in his Bible, the Old Testament. Perhaps there's a clue in the next part of the sentence - that it all takes place "**in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb.**" Now at first sight this might seem rather ghoulish - like an archetypal villain taking merciless delight in the helplessness of his captured foe. But there are other ways of explaining such a scenario: the scene is a heavenly court rather than a squalid jail. The Lamb and the angels are guardians of legitimacy - indeed the Lamb stands there still bearing the marks of his own slaughter - the marks of love which those before him had refused.

When we combine these images of legitimacy and torture the emphasis of the mix becomes slightly less lurid but much, much more powerful. The picture conjured by this "bad language" is telling us that so great is the offence of destroying what God has made good, so great is the offence of thinking you can place yourself on God's throne, that the just and legitimate sentence would be slow and painful torture. Jesus said something similar when he said in Matthew 18:6 "**if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned**

in the depths of the sea.” Is Jesus really contemplating such a horrendous form of rough justice? Probably not - but he’s certainly pointing to the seriousness of destroying childhood, and the great offence of leading people astray from faith.

The way ancient law worked - not least in the Old Testament - was to do the punishment fitting the crime - an eye for an eye etc. Sometimes this meant the offender had to recompense the offended for their loss; sometimes it meant they needed to experience something of what they had caused the other. Clearly recompense is irrelevant in the case of God and impossible when it comes to the ruin of creation, so if this torture is about experiencing something of what has been done to God then the picture’s telling us that God himself is being tortured as he watches a world in rebellion against him. For God the Creator to witness his world being ruined, his creatures mindlessly colluding with one bent on destruction, is itself as if he himself were being eternally tormented with burning sulphur. The passage tells us more about the present experience of God therefore, than future experience of humanity. But we’ll come back to future human experience in a moment.

Eternal Torment?

That brings us to the phrase, **“the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever.”** What does this mean? Again it sound horribly lurid. Hellfire and brimstone preachers have made much of it over the centuries. Well, the phrase seems deliberately reminiscent of Isaiah’s prophecy of the destruction of Edom, the dust of which **“will be turned to burning sulphur... not be quenched night and day. The smoke of it will rise for ever and ever.”** (Isaiah 34:11) Isaiah prophesied that but of course the burning of a city was actually a finite event. When a city was sacked in ancient times, the smoke that went up would keep rising and be visible for a good while. It was intended as a sign, the memory of which would be handed down through generations, just as we’re stilled today when we see old photos of the **mushroom cloud** above Hiroshima. The picture evokes questions: what caused such a terrible thing? How can it be avoided in future? So the historical reality was that the city eventually ceased burning, and the smoke ceased rising. Yet when Isaiah **spoke of Edom** he used the image of **“smoke rising for ever and ever”** to convey the *message*: this is an everlasting memorial that justice will come and sin will not have the last word.

Where’s the Truth?

So I’ve talked about the images. I’ve tried to explain what I think it means and a little of why the Holy Spirit, mingling with John’s imagination, is using this “bad language”. But how much of it’s true and in what way? It may take us to the heart of God now, but what does it tell us

objectively about the future for human beings? Can it be true that Jesus Christ spends eternity personally supervising the torture of sinners whilst at the same time presiding over the joyful bliss of myriad worshippers?

The main truth and message of what John's saying seems to lie elsewhere than in an objective picture of what will literally happen to God's enemies. As soon as you move away from that message and look for literal revelation of things to come where does such literalism end? All too often we give into the logic of fundamentalism and dispose with metaphor altogether. One commentator therefore says, "*To even ask whether Revelation teaches eternal torment for the damned is to misconstrue the book as a source of doctrines, to mistake its pictures for propositions.*" (Eugene Boring, p.170) I fully believe in the judgement of God. I fully believe in human beings facing an awe-filled, truly awful realisation that there is one to whom we should have lived with accountability, and one who could have saved us. Yet the literal interpretation of eternal torture of a never dying sulphurous flame simply doesn't marry with the rest of what we know revealed of God in Jesus Christ.

So if a literal understanding isn't true, then what is true? The truth lies in the *message*: That God is hugely angry over the destruction of his world; that our collusion with that destruction is like torture to him; that he will bring justice to the earth and heavens and his justice will be final. The "**smoke which goes up for ever and ever**" is an image of permanent reminder of God's passionate justice. Nevertheless, the same God calls for repentance and renewal of worship among rebellious creatures. The slaughtered-but-living Lamb of God stands at the centre of the court as the proof of God's open mercy to all who turn to him. and decisive, dealing righteously with his own anger and pain which he has suffered. Nevertheless, the same God calls for repentance and renewal of worship among rebellious creatures. The slaughtered-but-living Lamb of God stands at the centre of the court as the proof of God's open mercy to all who turn to him.

God *is* angry but he chooses take that anger upon himself rather than upon the world, and for those who turn to Christ, the Risen Lamb of God, the forgiveness is completely full and completely free. In the light of this amazing, costly and available gift, the wanton refusal of people to turn to him is even more distressing. Jesus said, "**Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgement than for you.**" (Mt 11:21-22)

In Sri Lanka, at least 5,000 child soldiers have been recruited since 2001. Despite the ceasefire signed in 2002, the threat of re-recruitment is once again so strong that parents are afraid to let children leave the house. An estimated 11,000 children are currently involved with militias in DRC. Children as young as eight are being recruited by the government army of Southern Sudan. Around 75% of former girl soldiers in Liberia reported having suffered sexual

abuse or exploitation. How would you feel if this was your creation? And of course, as the Pope has been speaking about this week in the States, the church has at times colluded very badly. How would you feel if this was your creation?

Earlier this week the Pope was speaking about sexual abuse in the church. *“No words of mine could describe the pain and harm inflicted by such abuse.”* He spoke of *“Deep shame”* *“enormous pain”* *“gravely immoral behaviour.”* How would you feel if this was your creation? How would you feel if this what what your own church, redeemed and loved by, had colluded with? Would you be there with the cup of wrath? And as long as you held back that cup because of extended grace, it would be like torture to watch.

Your Response

So how does this leave you feeling? Do you feel comforted that maybe John isn't asking us to envisage God engaged in an eternity of sadistic torture? I hope so - if my understanding of this text is true. But the word is also inviting us to perceive the great offence in the heart of God, the deep wounding of his heart at the relentless destruction of what he originally made “good”. And the destruction runs far and wide - wherever sin, abuse, hatred and evil, arrogance, lies, deceit exists. And in as much as we collude with it, then we too need to repent. And as much as we hold back the Good News of Jesus - we need to repent.

John concludes these images with the sentence: **“this calls for patient endurance on the part of those who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.”** (v.13) Are you seeking to obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus? It can be a struggle, but those in Christ are urged to persevere all the way until our promised rest. Working at this thing we call faithful obedience doesn’t mean we get it right all the time - far from it. But it does mean we pay attention to the message of God’s heart, it does mean we return in penitence to the Lamb of God, asking for his Spirit once again to empower us to live lives in his service.

Why don't we do that right now?