

Article for Henley Standard Thought for the Week. 27/1/15. From Kevin Davies.

The smaller god.

Being taunted for one's faith has a long history. The Book of the Psalms, which contains possibly some of the oldest writing in the Bible (going back to 1000BC) frequently contains complaints that God's people were being derided by powerful others, and that He (God) was not doing very much about it. Some of the early story-cycles of the Old Testament are rich in similar themes; Noah is mocked for his faith in God and for obeying God by building an ark; Nehemiah and all of Jerusalem are ridiculed for thinking that they can rebuild the walls of that ruined city. Jews and Christians alike are used to laughter being directed at them for their faith because it is an accepted part of their scriptural heritage. We know that God can cope with it. He's above all that.

We also know that the same literary tradition contains many other examples where God's people get the last laugh, so to speak. Moses, thanks to God's intervention, overcomes the humiliations of Pharaoh and leads Israel to freedom. David's skill shot avenges the insults and laughter of the Philistine Goliath; and in the New Testament the fundamentalist bully boy Saul sees the light and is converted to faith in Jesus on the road to Damascus. Unsurprisingly, the local churches at the time struggled to come to terms with this one.

The Bible also, daringly, has a number of examples where individuals laugh at (challenge) God, even though the letter of the law forbids "putting God to the test". Abraham's wife Sarah laughs to herself at the Lord's news that she would bear a son in her old age. The Psalmist challenges God to get with the action "because I can't praise you if I'm dead, can I?" In both cases, however, God hears the mockery, and God acts, sovereignly, without wounded human pride springing to His defence.

In our own day it seems that some people with over inflated religious pride find that God is being a little slow to defend himself, and is needful of overtly violent human support. However the god as revealed by these hideous actions is not God as revealed in Christian Scriptures but a small, shrivelled god of human making, one made of rage and war, and who bursts into violent tears when teased. God as revealed by Jesus Christ took the whole weight of the world's evil upon himself and worked salvation for us by suffering violence, and not by doing violence.

Jesus regarded persecution and mockery as an inevitable part of the road to blessedness, to which the Christian should respond with joy for being counted worthy to walk in the footsteps of the saints. Enemies are to be loved, and prayed for, not lined up and shot.

This is the astonishing and hard teaching which has caught the imagination of men and women for two thousand years. You can read it for yourself in Matthew chapter 5, but the relevant verses are these:

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

"You have heard that it was said 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven."