

Ruthlessness towards evil tendencies within ourselves.

Of what are many adjectives used to describe people with which we do not find ourselves comfortable or would not like applied to ourselves, one would be surely the word, "ruthless". Webster's Dictionary gives the meaning of 'ruthless' as being 'pitiless' and 'unsparing'. And it is listed in Roget's Thesaurus along with such words as 'cruel', 'grim', 'hard-hearted', 'tyrannical', and 'sadistic'. We describe as 'ruthless' someone who hasn't got any feeling for other people. Back in the 1960s British Railways decided the time had come to be ruthless about many of the unprofitable and underpatronised country rail lines. And despite the outrage of isolated country communities affected, and the inconvenience involved, the cuts went ahead. It will be said, perhaps, of a young executive, that he is 'ruthless' and has driving ambition. He doesn't mind treading over other people as he climbs his way to the top. A television documentary on the Soviet dictator Stalin, referred to his ruthless elimination of opponents to his regime.

Well, whilst we may argue the need to be ruthless on occasions, it nevertheless remains true that we would not like to be regarded as 'ruthless' people. The point is, of course, that ruthlessness is the very opposite of certain qualities which lie at the heart of Christianity and which we associate with a Christian.

A Christian has pity and compassion, and is sensitive to the feelings of others. A Christian is tolerant and forgiving. Ruthlessness has no room for any of these things. Be that as it may, and though it troubles people, ruthlessness is applauded in numerous places throughout the Scriptures. It's not too much to say, in fact, that it is a recurring theme.

Some of the instances I refer to will be familiar to you. Others not as familiar.

When the people of Israel, under the leadership of Joshua, started their conquest of the Promised Land they were soon in the depths of despair about an early set back. The instructions had been given that Jericho, the first walled city they came up against, was to be totally destroyed. Someone, sadly, couldn't bring himself to forgo the opportunity of some minor looting, and in the very next battle the Israelites tasted their first defeat. And nothing would be accomplished; no further progress made; until they had righted the wrong that had earlier been done. The instructions had been to be totally ruthless with Jericho. But they weren't. And they were, when he was discovered, ruthless with the looter, Achan, in a way that would horrify us today.

This same unwillingness to carry through instructions, or to be as ruthless as had been commanded, was the downfall of Saul, the first King, who reigned before David. In his heart he must have questioned the necessity of such ruthlessness. "Now go" it had been told him, "and smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass." But Saul spared some of them. He wasn't ruthless enough. And from that time onwards his kingdom would be taken from him.

I wonder if you remember the story of Deborah? Deborah was one of the 'Judges', as they are called, in that period after the settlement of the Promised Land before the time of the kings. As with all of the Judges, she was raised up at a time of national distress and crises, when Israel's enemies, this time the Canaanites, were getting the best of them. Deborah organised an army and inspired a great victory. And the story ends with a description of the utterly ruthless way the enemy general was put to death. It receives, let it be noted, only applause and congratulations.

There are, indeed, very good reason why we like the Psalms. They so wonderfully express the feelings and moods we have. The 137th Psalm, however, is about Babylon. And after denouncing that country, it ends with the quite startling and at the same time 'ruthless' sentiment, "Happy shall he be that takes and dashes your little ones against the stones".

These are just a few examples from the Old Testament where ruthlessness is approved, encouraged and insisted upon. There are many others. The question is, What do we make of them?

We can, of course, and rightly so, argue the times and context in which these things were done or said. After all, primitive concepts of justice prevailed; and the old law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was the accepted standard, or governing factor, where human relationships were concerned. But that alone doesn't justify the inclusion of these incidents and sentiments in the Word of God. For that justification we have, in fact, got to look elsewhere.

It served the Lord's purposes very well indeed that these examples of ruthlessness should be retained, remembered, and written up as part of the Divine Word. Reflecting the attitudes and approaches of those times as these stories did, yet, and for that very reason, they could serve as a most powerful vehicle for conveying a deeper, spiritual, meaning which would always have relevance to people no matter in what age they lived.

Throughout our life in this world it cannot but be that we have habits to be overcome; selfishness and selfish ways come to the forefront, almost without our being aware of them, and we have to overcome these as well. We can be beset by the darkest and most uncharitable thoughts about other people. We misinterpret a word or action or judge wrongly about another person's motive. There is always the temptation to take revenge, to gloat over an enemy's misfortune, or to bask in the glory of some accomplishment. The Old Testament Israelites had their enemies. And so, most certainly, have we. And as ruthless as they were encouraged, indeed, commanded, to be, so must we be.

There can be no half-heartedness, no faint-heartedness, no compromise, with evil. In effect this is what these stories we have spoken about are there to teach us. If there is one place for ruthlessness in our lives it is here. One doesn't make bargains. One doesn't set up one's own judgment as having the right to decide what should be got rid of and what should be kept, as Saul did. One doesn't try to hang on to a few morsels of the pleasure and satisfaction our old selfish, and self-orientated, ways gave us. It must all go. This is what is commanded. This is what must be. As were the words spoken to Saul, as are also spoken to us concerning our spiritual enemies. "Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling; ox and sheep, camel and ass."

Part of the reason why we refuse to be as ruthless as we should, and fail to reject completely an evil that has some hold over us, is that its true nature is in some way obscured to us. We are affected by, or we ourselves resort to, rationalisations about it. We play down its true nature. We don't want to see it for what it really is. We refuse to recognise it for what it truly is. Most people, for example, would stoutly, even hotly, resent tax evasion being called 'theft'. But that is what it is.

We are called upon time and time again to "shun" our evils, not just because they harm others or would bring shame upon us, but because they are sins against the Lord. What do you think of, though, when that word "shun" is mentioned? Perhaps, putting up a barrier; holding them at arm's length; avoiding them. In fact it means far, far more than that. The Latin word "fugio" which is translated "shun" means "to flee" or "run away". It carries with it a sense of fear and horror. To shun evil is to shrink from it and to flee from it in fear and horror.

There is a danger in Society today that we become so used to violence and disorder, that they in fact cease to shock or horrify us as they should do. We tend to take things for granted. We become insensitive to the smutty bumper stickers; the disregard for marriage; the common-place swearing. And within ourselves the same things happen. If we don't stop and look at ourselves; question the direction of our lives; where we are going; the things which please and delight us... unless we remind ourselves of standards and reach towards them.... we too become insensitive and uncaring, even accepting. In turn we have no heart for the fight, let alone do we have that willingness to be ruthless with these things, as we need to be, if they are to be driven from our lives.

There is, we've said, just one area in our lives where we need to be completely ruthless. There is no room for compromise and half-heartedness. And that's where the disorders of life, and our own inclinations to them, are concerned.

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