

ROBERT COTTON'S SERMON on
THE RED TENT by ANITA DIAMANT

10am SUNG EUCHARIST AT HOLY TRINITY
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Read this book and you'll read a good story. There's love, betrayal, passion, commitment that spans generations and continents, stupidity, kindness and hospitality which is so life-giving. I am sure we are all well aware of the anxieties of our own age: our fear of change, nothing seeming safe, and security being unavailable. But here is a story where people are NOT destroyed by banishment or exile, where families and traditions are NOT broken, where those supremely good qualities that can take more than one generation to come to fruition are NOT lost in spite of war, murder, famine. It is an encouraging, a heart-warming story.

But if you want more, read it with an eye to all the other Bible stories that you know well and they will come to life again. The characters of this book are familiar. You have Abraham, Rebekah, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons, and of course his thirteenth child, the daughter. You have so many familiar characters and the backdrop therefore is familiar if you know your Bible at all well. But of course life then was very different. How easy it is to look at historical figures and make them in our own image! But life 3000 years ago was different. Even if the author does not paint life precisely as it was then, she does have the great gift of imagination to make the characters come alive. Moreover, she does this in a way that gives me confidence that I can do the same for other stories. And so, I reckon, read this and you will find the whole of the Old Testament can become more lively, more accessible.

You heard Jane read the story from Genesis Chapter 34 which in some ways is the origin of this book. Dinah, Jacob's daughter and thirteenth child, is loved by a foreigner. Her brothers say you can only marry her if your whole city is circumcised. And they reply: "willingly!" But the brothers are deceitful, murder them in their beds and destroy the city. If this family is meant to provide the heroes of our faith, is not God in some ways implicated in all this?

The saying 'history is written by the victors' needs to be changed slightly. 'History is, more often than not, written by the male victors'. So what would that story have sounded like if it had been told by Dinah, the bride? Or indeed if it had been told by the people of Shechem, the ones who survived? There is good value in faithful imagination, in being able to understand what it was like from the view-point of the victims, the minor characters, the slaves, the women, or the ones who are outside. For when we, the people of faith are scared, we so often become literalists. We cling onto texts, and cannot see behind or beyond. But maybe with a little humility, and a little courage, we can listen more carefully through the words of someone outside our faith tradition to hear the riches of our own tradition and stories.

There is another way too to read the book. You could read this book as a door into an age-old question: "what is God like?" The author understands that there are two classic approaches to answering that question. There is a way that men approach religion and there is a way that women do it. Now this is not a feminist tract, this is not a theoretical

book merely trying to do the general questions of feminism and masculinism in our own age on an ancient backdrop. So let me be specific.

One of the defining moments, right at the source of our Jewish/Christian tradition, is related to us in Genesis Chapter 22. God says to Abraham, "Take your son and kill him". It is a ghastly story to modern ears. But if you have a certain approach to our tradition, as many of the ancients did, it makes perfect sense because fundamentally God is a God who is to be appeased. God is an angry, turbulent God. He is awesome in power, a God who is far better kept at a distance, a God who demands overwhelming obedience. The Psalms speak of it at times; the Psalms say not 'come close to us because we know you are a God of love', but 'stay away from us and then we will be able to live in peace'. The poor peasants simply did not want the high and mighty King to come anywhere near them. This approach generally tried to define clearly what God was like. Unlike the gods of the other tribes and nations they had very few names for God: Jahweh, El Shaddai, the mighty one. But is a very small step from defining what God is, to concentrating on what God is not. This tradition is always in the danger of saying 'this, this and this is not God' and therefore to be feared, or indeed destroyed, as the people of Shechem were.

Or you can do your religion differently. There are others who approach God by seeing God fully and totally immersed in the rhythms of life. Indeed it is in the very natural ebb and flow of life where we start to see God revealed and God appear. This approach does not define God; it is much more a matter of discerning God. God is more to be honoured than appeased. Classically this is the way women do their religion. But the God of nature, so some will say, can so easily turn into the god in nature. Worshippers, so the accusation goes, confuse the creator with the created; they see god as fully embodied in trees or rivers, or life blood. Then there is only a very tiny step away to paganism.

Now having distinguished clearly enough these two approaches, I cannot imagine that we are not all feeling in some way or other that there is truth in both. Surely there is a way of approaching God using the best of both traditions. But how can we convey that? For the stories and traditions we inherit are only written from one perspective or the other - but not in both languages at the same time. Indeed most of the Old Testament was written by the party of the Priests who definitely took the approach that God is a God of might and power and strength and authority. God is a God who gives rules and what God demands of us is obedience and determination and courage. Those parts of the Old Testament not written by the priestly party were generally written by the prophets. This group were those who often opposed the priests. Yet the prophets wrote in the same language too. They did not like the priests because they thought the priests were indolent, and selfish and undemanding - but they had the same approach. So it is very important to listen carefully, and treasure deeply, those few stories which are in a different language, and which stem from an experience of God received in a different way. All are worshipping the same God, acknowledging the same truth, but the cadences and the harmonies are different.

These matters live today. I'm not just talking about how religion is done in the Old Testament. Go to some churches in this town and you will hear the cadences of a very muscular masculine Christianity. As I walk in to such churches I can feel very disturbed about what they think it is to be a woman, or indeed to be a man, of faith. Or as I listen to

some of the opponents of the ordination or consecration of women, I find it very hard to think that I am honouring the same God as them. (I am describing this, not condemning them, just describing what I feel). Or indeed consider what is going on in Bali at the moment. The people who do such atrocities are nourished in a certain sort of tradition which is based on a faith, which is founded on answers to the question 'what is God like?' I am not saying 'all Muslims would do that'. Did you hear that? Those who do such atrocities are nourished in a tradition that is founded on a faith that asks, as all religions do, 'what is God like?' For us that question lives as well. How can we make sure that our actions are nourished by a tradition that is founded on the faith of Christ that answers the same question 'what is God like?' And if we think we know something of what is God like, how can we allow that spirit to inform our faith and our tradition and so make our actions and our character suitable for that God? We mustn't avoid those questions, and I believe that having read this book, I am more ready and stronger to face them.

Amen.