

Trouble with a Priest

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] this is the morning service at holy trinity on the 13th of october 2002 the preacher is paul barker his sermon is entitled trouble with a priest and is based on judges chapters 19 to 21 oh god you speak to us in all sorts of different ways and as we come to these fairly horrible chapters we pray that you may not only inform us but reform our lives so that they may be more in line with your character and the lord jesus christ and we pray for his sake amen 55 years he got bilal scuff the ringleader of the gang rape in sydney of august 2000 55 years almost 40 years non-parole period and you may have seen in yesterday's paper or heard on friday's news that uh the last arrested member of that gang muhammad ghanem was sentenced this week for 40 years jail and no parole until 2027 the judge said that the victim would carry the scars for the rest of her life it was a crime worse than murder the gang rape in sydney in august 2000 by nine youths has appalled us and five of the gang are still not caught gang rape murder violence barbarism civil war treachery you can read it every day in the paper and you can read it in the bible in the book of judges these last three chapters of the book of judges are perhaps the most horrific in all of the old testament my guess is that for most of you you've never heard them preached on i've never preached on them maybe i never will again who says the bible is irrelevant ironically it's the people who claim the bible's not not relevant that often want to leave chapters like this out but here is a reflection of the world in which we live every day in these chapters at the end of the book of judges israel israel reaches rock bottom last week we saw their corrupt religion and this week we see that corrupt religion gives way to corrupt morality in practice israel the people of god saved and redeemed by god's grace and mercy and power are no better than pagan people we see in these chapters we see here that they're keener to march to war against one of their own tribes than they ever have been against the canaanite pagans in the land and even in these chapters the noblest actions that we see here by individuals or tribes as a whole are tainted by compromise with evil and sin this is life in a moral morass a religious anarchy everyone did what was right in their own eyes it begins with a man from the tribe of levi the priestly tribe who lived amongst all the other tribes of israel with a priestly role a religious role in leadership this levite was living in the tribal area of ephraim but we're told at the beginning of that reading in verse 1 that he took for himself a concubine and though this concubine seems to have a status as a wife her father is called his father-in-law nonetheless by using the word concubine there is this connotation of something is not quite right that a man has taken a concubine maybe in addition to a wife we're not quite sure

and she we're told in verse 2 makes him angry but the language that's used for making him angry is the language of being unfaithful of playing the harlot sleeping around with other men no wonder he was angry and so she returns to her home for four months her home is in a different tribal area in the tribe of judah further south and she goes to her father's house there for four months and after that four months the levite man decides to go and retrieve her to speak tenderly to her to woo her back to him and her father is pleased about that he's full of joy when this concubine's husband comes to in effect collect her in verse 3 now in the middle east often hospitality or usually it's very warm and people are very hospitable often it's very lavish and i know that on occasions when i've traveled in israel palestine and jordan uh being the recipient of great hospitality even to strangers and here we find in uh judges 19 contrasts of hospitality the father of the concubine is lavish in his hospitality every day while the man is there they eat and drink all day it seems indeed it's almost indulgent or over indulgent and on the third day uh the uh after eating and drinking the levite decides it's time to return home but the father of the concubine urges him to stay keep eating keep drinking here's another platter of food a few more glasses of beer or wine or whatever on the fourth day the same sort of thing the levite decides it's time to return home the father of the concubine urges him to stay and finally the levite breaks away late in the day mid-afternoon that sort of time clearly you could imagine him thinking over these days am i ever going to get out of here but finally he does but the delay in getting going causes problems because now he cannot get home in daylight it's probably a long day's journey to go from bethlehem in judah where the concubine's father lived all the way back to the remote hill country of ephraim and so having left late in the afternoon because of the insistent hospitality of the concubine's father he's not going to make it before dark and so he needs a place to stay on the way home and on route from bethlehem it's not all that far to jerusalem or as it was then called jebus in the time of judges and joshua before it was still a pagan canaanite city the jebusites had been they had been unable to conquer jerusalem or jebus as it was then called and that we have to wait until king david is around as king before jebus is actually conquered and made jerusalem the servant of this man the levite says well why don't we turn aside and stay the night here in jebus it's beginning to get dark and the man replies in effect rightly in verse 12 we will not turn aside into a city of foreigners who do not belong to the people of israel but we will continue on to gibeah now there's the expectation there that the people of israel would provide hospitality for other members of the people of israel it's actually part of the old testament law above all people the people of god are to be hospitable people providing good hospitable hospitality for each other even for strangers the same commands are there in the new testament for the people of god to be hospitable and so should we as well and rightly this man decides that it would be better to push on to an israelite town to receive proper hospitality rather than to risk being in a pagan town like jebus and so he says well let's go on further to gibeah or ramah which are cities in the tribe of benjamin a little bit further

north jebus jerusalem is right on the border of judah benjamin territory now ironically that was a fatal fateful decision because when they got to gibeah after dark that night there was no hospitality offered no locals took them in in verse 15 we're told they turned aside there to gibeah and went and spent the night to spend the night there and he went in and sat down in the open square of the city but no one took them in to spend the night so there were no hotels in those days no motels or anything like that the idea was that you'd arrive at a little town everybody would know if somebody's arriving in these little places and people would be under in a sense moral obligation to come out and and bring someone in for hospitality come and stay with me for the night roll down your bed we'll look after your animals in our stall and so on but here in gibeah a try in the tribal territory of benjamin nothing was offered for this man with his concubine and his servant and their donkeys and they're laden it's not as though people have to provide lots of food it looks as though the man has got everything he needs apart from a bed and shelter for the night of course there is this old man who comes to provide hospitality but he's not even from the town of gibeah or the tribe of benjamin this old man we're told came in from his work in the field in verse 16 he was from the hill country of ephraim and he was residing in gibeah and the fact that he's coming in so late in the evening well and truly after dark it seems probably suggests either that he's poor and he's had to work long hours or maybe that his field is remote from the town and therefore again that he's poor because he doesn't get the choice field closer to the town where there's more security this old man from the tribal country of ephraim the same tribe where the levite is living offers him hospitality he saw the wayfarer in the open square of the city in verse 17 he asked him what he was doing he was his uh the levite replies we're passing from bethlehem to the remote parts of the hill country of ephraim from which i come and now i'm going home from bethlehem he says and nobody's offered to take me in and so this old man offers him exemplary hospitality he takes him in to his own house verse 21 he fed the donkeys he washed their feet or they washed their feet and they ate and they drank that's exactly the sort of hospitality the people of god are meant to offer but now the events take a turn for the worst as we heard in the reading the continuation the reading that richard read while they're enjoying themselves verse 22 the men of the city of gibeah a perverse lot surrounded the house and started pounding on the door they said to the old man the master of the house bring out the man who came into your house they know they'd seen him in the city square probably and turn their backs on him there so that we may have intercourse with him not social intercourse they're not wanting a nice chat with a cup of tea they're wanting sex with him they're wanting to abuse him this is a gang of thugs wanting a visiting man to be thrown to their mercy outside they are wicked and vile that's what their intentions are the old man knows that he says to them in verse 23 no my brothers do not act so wickedly since this man is my guest do not do this vile thing can be under no illusions here this is not just a nice social call this is a perverse lot of people who are acting wickedly and want to do a vile thing very clear to us now even though their intentions are appalling the response to them leaves a lot to be

desired the man of the house the host offers his own virgin daughter and the man the levite's concubine let me bring them out now ravish them do whatever you want to them but against this man do not do such a vile thing appalling though it may be to imagine this gang of men wanting to in effect rape the visiting man it's perhaps even more appalling that the host of the house would offer them his daughter and the man's concubine to do whatever they want the men didn't want that but the man levite that is took his concubine and he put her out to them you can imagine him just sort of quickly opening the door and bundling her out so that they can grab her and not him and shutting the door and locking it behind her what an appalling action for the concubine he's just gone to get back from her father and then we're told in very blunt terms in verse 25 they wantonly raped her they abused her all through the night and as the dawn began to break literally they discarded her left her for dead and as morning appeared the woman came as far as the door of the man's house and there collapsed presumably dead gang rape at its worst what sort of penalty applies for those who know their bibles this must remind us of some other place at another time because in the first book of the bible in the book of genesis a similar event occurs the person whose life was a threat was lot and he was protected by angels and the city where he was visiting was destroyed by god in judgment that city was sodom sodom and the name sodom still stands in our own vocabulary for evil actions and throughout the bible in the prophets for example sodom is the if you like the model or mark of evil and the judgment of god against evil and even in the words of jesus the same model is held up of judgment of god against sodom we cannot escape the deliberate similarities that are painted here in this chapter we are meant to see them we are meant to see that here the people of god are at rock bottom they have slipped full length the slippery slide of sin into a moral morass so that they are no better than the worst city that you can imagine as described in the bible sodom the archetype of immorality and condemned by god israel is no better than the pagan nations around about them and even more appalling than these the actions of these men of gibeah the man himself the levite seems so callous tossing her out to protect himself at night then going off to sleep maybe even to continue eating and drinking and having a nice time and then when he gets up in the morning and prepares to leave he opens the door there she is dead it seems on the doorstep he says come on get up let's go no sort of repentance no anxiety no looking after her worried about her condition and when she makes no response he lifts her up bundles her on the donkey and takes her home and cuts her into 12 pieces and sends the pieces around to the other tribes here now is there a sense of objection about what's going on but one wonders really about the man's motivations and love and care he seems to show little care for her the night before but now all of a sudden he's taking the moral

high ground so in verse 29 when he'd entered his house he took a knife and grasping his concubine he cut her into 12 pieces limb by limb and sent her throughout all the territory of israel then he commanded the men whom he sent saying thus shall you say to all the israelites has such a thing ever happened since the day that the israelites came up from the land of egypt until this day consider it take counsel and speak out why does society stoop so low as this why do the people of god fall as far as this what's gone wrong what's the problem last week it was our diocesan synod our annual parliament where motions and laws are passed for the anglican diocese of melbourne and there was one motion about iraq and all the various machinations that are going on with iraq and embedded in this fairly lengthy motion was a little statement that we deplore terrorism and seek to address its roots root causes by providing humanitarian aid is that the problem for terrorists is that the problem for the people of gibeon that they lacked sufficient government or humanitarian aid that a little bit of provision from the government of israel might somehow have made the people of gibeon happy lot hospitable and careful and wise and moral is that what they needed some better education grant more money and funding for schools was their crime because of some deprived upbringing well certainly in any society there are a range of social factors that do exacerbate evil or curb it but in the end that's not going to address the root cause no amount of humanitarian aid is going to stop terrorism in the world no amount of humanitarian educational aid in gibeon was going to stop these men doing these things the root cause is sin in the heart of people that's the problem the people of israel had come and drift from god from the living and real god and the answer is not humanitarian aid or you know they're there taking people out of dysfunctional families or something like that the root cause is a heart that is sinful that is cut off from god drifted from god in the first half of this book the expression that kept recurring was israel did evil in the eyes of the lord and subtly it changes in the second half of the book so it says that israel did right in their own eyes and there i think is a progression that yes the second half of the book is still evil in the eyes of the lord but what's happened is that israel has gone down the slippery slope of sin that we've seen through this book no longer can they determine right from wrong and so now the evil that they do is not only evil in the eyes of the lord but worse it is right in their own eyes so perverse and inverted has their morality become that acts of abomination and evil they consider to be right in their own eyes you see ultimately the abandonment of god by individuals churches and societies leads to moral blindness and anarchy we see it today in australia as our society which was never fully christian of course but becomes less and less christian and cut off from the real living god then it becomes more and more immoral not only in its actions but in what is approved and condoned by our society we see it in our laws in our advertisements in our films we see it in our society's attitudes not only to things like sexuality but to death and life itself remove christian religious foundations for an individual a church or a society

[20 : 14] and the moral superstructure that's built on that religious foundation loses its stability from the foundation it might stand for a while it might take a while for that to happen but through the generations of israel in the book of judges that's been what's going on their distance from god has taken away the foundations of stability and so their moral structures around that are gradually tottering and disintegrating and here at the end of the book are completely absent even the response to the people of gibeah's atrocity is itself highly compromised in response to this wanton act of gang rape the levite man rallies the eleven tribes of israel left apart from the tribe of benjamin where gibeah was they come from the very north to the south from dan to beersheba we're told in chapter 20 verse 1 and they all come outraged at what's going on ironically this is the only time in the book of judges that you get so many tribes together to do anything they're keener to actually fight against one of their own tribes than they ever have been to fight against the pagan enemies in the land that are threatening them and the levite explains to them in chapter 20 what's happened he says to them in verse 4 i came to gibeah that belongs to benjamin i and my concubine to spend the night the lords of gibeah rose up against me and surrounded the house at night they intended to kill me and they raped my concubine until she died but this man makes no mention of his own callous actions in thrusting out his concubine to protect his life he makes no mention of his own self-protecting discarding of her he makes no mention of his own ill discipline with her father that causes him to be on the road after dark anyway so his account is highly selective and as a result of what he says all israel rallies to attack one of its own earlier in the book deborah the great hero of chapters four and five preached on her a few weeks ago she bemoans the fact in chapter five that not all the tribes would come and help but here to fight one of their own they all do initially in chapter 20 verse 12 onwards they request extradition of the culprits from the tribe of benjamin benjamin but the people of benjamin as a whole decide not to they refuse the request and so 400 000 israelites are arrayed now against the tribe of benjamin 26 000 they've got in their army including 700 sharpshooters who are left-handed plus the men of gibeah the tribes of israel are headed by judah the tribe of judah from where the concubine came and they go to battle and for the first two days of battle things do not go according to plan benjamin achieves victories substantial ones there are severe casualties for the people of israel and each day they inquire of the lord what's going on here we're trying to punish an evil tribe and we're being defeated by them in battle and god says fight we might well say why why is israel failing in this battle when they are trying to sort of squash out the evil acts of the tribe of benjamin and if god has called them to fight or at least condone their fighting why is it that they suffer heavy casualties now it's a reminder to us i guess that often god's clear will does not mean an easy path god sometimes makes his will very clear for us but it's a path through strife and difficulty finally though on the third day the tribes of israel win through yahweh god's work in verse 35 but also through their own cunning strategy of an ambush

they eventually defeat the tribe of benjamin and gibeah the town where this atrocity occurred is put to the sword viciously and without mercy we're told in verse 37 of chapter 20 and just 600 men from the tribe of benjamin flee to safety the rest of the tribe men women and children put to death well it may be that we think justice has been done the tribe pretty much decimated for its appalling sin and its collaboration in that sin maybe we even think that the 600 men should be pursued and killed so the tribe is lost forever or maybe we think this is too harsh that somehow such an attack is unwarranted even though the sin was bad certainly judge michael fanane in sydney has many critics for the lengthy sentences he's imposed on those who are gang rapists but what happens next shows moral compromise and moral ambiguity continuing in israel because they realize that now all that is left of the tribe of benjamin are 600 men that's all no wives no children and if all you've got is 600 men then in a generation there'll be no one belonging to that tribe they'd made a vow it seems at the beginning of chapter 21 that no one shall give his daughter in marriage to benjamin to the tribe of benjamin a vow made presumably in outrage at the act of the the people of gibeah if they're to keep their vow then how on earth is the tribe of benjamin going to continue in history it'll just die out with the 600 men and so what follows is a fairly clever casuistry full of moral compromise in order to offer some sort of compensation if you like to the tribe of benjamin their women are dead there's a vow not to give any daughters in marriage to them so what do they do two things firstly in the first bit of chapter 21 they discover that the town of jabesh gilead in israel did not go out to fight therefore they decide to punish that town by killing them off which they go and do but they spare the virgin women of the of the town of jabesh gilead there are 400 of them and those virgin women are then given over to the tribe of benjamin after all you're not breaking the vow because they're not their daughters or wives that are being given trouble is of course there are only 400 of them and there are 600 men of the tribe of benjamin they need 200 more women so there comes the second strategy they realize that it's soon to be a festival at shiloh which is then the central religious place for the people of israel and they know that the young women will be dancing in the field rather than give those women over which would be breaking their vow and they don't want to break a vow they invite the men of benjamin to come and kidnap them and they won't retaliate and you see that exactly their treatment of those women at shiloh is pretty much what the men of gibeah did to that woman in the first place you see how morally compromised and morally ambiguous the people of israel have become and that's what happens by sort of clever playing with the laws full of moral indifference the people of israel treat their women little better than the men of gibeah treated the woman concubine the whole nation you see is compromised in sin and the downward spiral of sin has taken every tribe captive it's done what's right in its own eyes that's the last verse of the chapter and the book the trouble is their own eyes are blind morally they might have done what's right in their own eyes

but they're blind to see what is right or wrong and their eyes certainly do not see what is right in the lord's eyes it's the story of our world those who often take the high moral ground are often themselves compromised by their own sin we can see it perhaps in the high moral ground taken against iraq by some countries that turn their eyes against other situations in acts of hypocrisy the high moral ground taken against gang rapists by those who are blind to other sins in their lives as society drifts further from god's word it sinks further into a moral quagmire but more seriously as the people of god loosen their grip on god's word their moral foundations are removed and its perversity becomes pervasive why is that because we want to call the shots we want to determine what is right in our eyes we want to decide that that is right or that is wrong we want moral autonomy we want to be god that's what people are like ever since adam and eve tried that trick in the garden of eden with catastrophic results it's the same for every person in this world that we want to loosen our grip on god and his word because we want to do what is right in our eyes and these appalling events in these last chapters of judges are where we end up if that's what we do at the bottom of a spiral of sin no judge to rescue them here at the end of this book from this mess no deliverer on the horizon here at the end of this book indeed the last verse tells us that there was no king in israel our biggest dilemma is our sinful heart and the roots of sin exercise a stranglehold on us that we are unable to break and no mere human judge or hero can rescue us from sin's grip throughout this book of judges we've seen each week that the book decries this lack of good leadership for the people of god every hero or judge that is raised up is compromised in some way and each one is worse than the one before and so the last week's passages and this week's passages the end of this book there is no judge no deliverer no one to be a hero to stand up and lead the people of god no matter how compromised they might be but as this book keeps on decrying the lack of leadership for god's people it creates within us a frustration and an anxiety and an anticipation that somehow somewhere one day the leader for god's people par excellence will come the real king will come not just a human king like david comes a hundred years or so later himself an adulterer and murderer but a perfect king born ironically in bethlehem of judah from where this concubine came the one who will not only lead the people politically but also religiously and the one who will deal with the root cause of the problem and deliver not through splashing around humanitarian aid or educational grants not one who will remove people from dysfunctional families but the one who removes the sting of sin from the heart of people by taking it on himself and the one who in turn gives his powerful spirit to transform hearts and minds more into his likeness

as we read this book and ache at the sins of the people of god and we cry out for the leader that this book is longing for the prayer at the end of this book that we must surely pray above all prayers is simply this come lord jesus come soon