

# On Blame

*Assembly by Chris Eldridge, Head of History, March 2022*

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## LESSON: JOHN CHAPTER 8 VERSES 1-10

This is my second attempt at this sermon. What happened? Well in short Ukraine happened. Let us cast our minds back two months ago back to the time when I wrote my first draft – January. The members of Christmas cheer still lingered in our memory, the Covid scientists’ predictions of Omicron doom were mercifully proved unfounded, in fact the greatest cause of hostility was the antics of our own Prime Minister and whether he did or did not break his own lockdown rules. In this benevolent window of time coming at the end of a profound period of trauma and anger I felt it was right to speak on the subject of blame, our relationship with it and whether or not it was necessary or helpful. Then as I say, Ukraine happened.

As we heard in our reading, Jesus was not a fan of blame. When pressed to condemn a woman accused of adultery in accordance with the law he instead calls upon the accusers to examine their own conscience uttering the famous phrase ‘Let he who is without sin cast the first stone’. This is not the only time Jesus speaks out against blaming others, another famous phrase that has entered the English language, turning the other cheek’ originates from the Sermon on the Mount in which he says: ‘You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.’

This is incredibly challenging advice that seems to go against all human instinct for self-preservation. Yet this message of infinite forgiveness and the avoidance of blame is at the very heart of who the God of the New Testament is. Possibly the most influential Englishwoman of the Middle Ages, the mystic Julian of Norwich claimed that God had granted her a vision of His true nature within which she said the abiding feelings she encountered were infinite compassion, infinite forgiveness and the total absence of blame: In her vision God actually speaks: It is true that sin is cause of all this suffering, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. These words were said very tenderly, indicating no kind of blame.

As Christians we are taught that the imitation of God is at the heart of our journey of spiritual development. Judging and blaming is therefore very much something we should avoid doing as far as possible. And modern events would certainly suggest that blame is a corrosive force, a poison that breaks down our relationships between each other, whether

they be in person and or electronically. A little less blame and a little more understanding would I think benefit a British society still dividing and sore from the divisions caused by Brexit, the same could be said of post-Trump America.

Where there is blame there is division and judgement. Blame leads to bigotry, the inability to empathise with, respect or even accept that another person has the right to a different view. And blame respects no political boundaries, consider media grabbing recent issues – Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, ‘No Platforming’ at universities and you can see bigots on both sides, trapped in a futile echo chamber of recrimination who see words like reconcile, compromise and discuss are seen as weakness. In this context, suddenly turning the other cheek and avoiding casting the first stone seem very wise words indeed.

Yet even so it takes an immense exercise of grace on a person’s part not to blame, not to judge, particularly when the perceived slight is aimed at us individually. One of the things they tell us during teacher training is not to take things pupils say personally and at times it can be very hard indeed. But is so worth the effort, to shed blame is to cast aside a corrosive within that can eat a person up so much that eventually the cease to be a person at all, and instead simply become a portable vehicle of hate. It is in this extreme context that we should view the otherwise inexplicable behaviour of terrorists and violent criminals.

So far so good. But then, as I say Ukraine happened. And personally I do blame, I do judge. No amount of analysis or extenuating circumstances can erase the fact to me that Vladimir Putin made himself into a monster last month when he ordered a brutal invasion of another country. Not to blame in this context threatens to fall into the realm of moral relativism, the nihilistic philosophy that pretty much anything is justifiable given the right conditions and the correct moral standpoint. As Christians we simply cannot do this. Futile, indiscriminate slaughter of the sort we have seen in Ukraine over the past few weeks is a dreadful sin and not to blame nor seek to bring to justice those who have committed it would be an offence not only against God’s justice but our common humanity.

So is there such a thing as good and bad blame? I think there is. Bad blame is futile and self-destructive, it is the act of judging someone either for something they cannot help doing or who they are, or judging them for disagreeing with you, or castigating them for genuine mistakes. Futile blame offers no opportunity for personal growth or justice. Good blame however, can be a righteous act if it seeks to offer learning and justice. At a low level it involves identifying something that a person has done wrong that can be corrected by different choices, but here as they tell us during teacher training you have to draw a distinction between the behaviour and the person committing it and focus on the former. But on a grander scale, in the face of prevent by catastrophe caused by human evil as we are seeing in Ukraine, blame needs to be apportioned – turning the other cheek is all very well when it’s your own cheek but if it’s somebody else’s who is innocent and helpless I think more direct measures are needed. This blame is of course about justice as well as protection, but it is also about memory. What is going on in the Ukraine at the moment must not be forgotten and in the short term there must be a reckoning for those who unleashed unbridled violence against an innocent people.

But one day we must remember that the blame must stop. War produces deep traditions of

blame of which we are only too aware – Israelis and Palestinians, Iranians and Iraqis, Catholics and Protestants in Ireland to name but a few. But to move forwards as a society, at some point we must replace blame with memory. I'd like to finish with the words of Desmond Tutu on this subject, a South African archbishop from a society deeply scarred by blame:

*"Forgiving is not forgetting; it's actually remembering - remembering and not using your right to hit back. It's a second chance for a new beginning. And the remembering part is particularly important. Especially if you don't want to repeat what happened."*