

Scapegoats

1 Peter 2.19-25

I am always on the lookout for a new TV series, so I was stoked when I saw that ‘Lord of the Flies’ has been made into a TV series. It’s based on a classic novel that I think may still be taught here at Rathkeale.

It’s about a group of boys who crash on a desert island, and it shows how they become tribal and then violent, and dehumanised. It poses the question of where evil comes from. In the TV series, the causes are shown to be jealousy, the way we have been treated in the past, the desire for power, and our own inner brokenness and pain.

Without wanting to give any spoilers, their inability to deal with this darkness and pain causes these boys to project it outward and to find something or someone to become the focus of their pain and their anger – what is called a ‘scapegoat’.

A scapegoat is someone or something that we unfairly blame for our problems and misfortunes. There can be a scapegoat in a family, in an organisation or workplace, or even in a nation as a whole – someone who becomes the focus of who’s to blame for all the problems that we have.

The word ‘scapegoat’ actually comes from a biblical tradition of sacrifice, where the priests would place all the sins of the people on a goat -the "**escape goat**". It was then driven out into the wilderness, carrying away the people's "guilt."

Rev. Ben Arcus

Watching ‘Lord of the Flies’ reminded me of working in high schools – particularly boys’ schools. It reminded me how boys can become quite tribal, excluding some and including others, and how this can quite easily turn into bullying, and in the worst cases, violence.

It also resonated with me because whenever I have to work with boys who have acted in this way, I find that inside they are filled with feelings of anger and hurt; sometimes because they have been bullied themselves, or because there is tension in their family lives that they bring into school.

I did this when I was young. I was bullied, and so I became a bully too. And I hated myself for the way that I became. That’s the problem with having a scapegoat – it just perpetuates the cycle of violence, by creating more hurt and angry people who then go and project their rage onto others.

Sometimes I despair at these cycles of bullying, exclusion and pain that I see in schools. Every year, particularly in the junior school, I see new boys who play out these roles of hurt and exclusion and who damage themselves and others in the way they interact with other people. And of course, school is just a smaller example of the kinds of cycles we see in wider society, and even between countries.

The current war in Iran is just the latest example of these endless cycles of conflict and revenge.

This idea of the 'scapegoat' is one of the ways we can understand Jesus and what he did at Easter. At Easter we remember how Jesus voluntarily offered himself as a scapegoat. He allows himself to be the focus of the rage, brokenness and pain of his people.

But by freely choosing to take on the violence and pain of the world – what the Bible calls 'Sin' – and by offering himself as a sacrifice, and forgiving those who crucify him, even as he is in the middle of his suffering, Jesus offers a way to end the cycle of violence and pain.

And when you consider that in Jesus, God, the creator and originator of all things, has in fact stepped into our human history, in order to feel our pain and brokenness, and to take it onto themselves, then perhaps you can begin to see that a new way for humanity is opened up by this action.

God opens to us a new path, through Jesus' sacrifice, of a life centred on forgiveness, on healing, and of self-sacrificial love.

As nice an intellectual idea as all of this is, it has no real power, and no real effect, unless it has a real, personal connection with individuals.

This is what happened for me: As I said, I became a bully at college, because of the way I had been bullied and because of a deep sense of rejection I felt. I eventually started to hate myself for the person I was becoming.

And this disillusionment, led me to read the Bible and to decide that I wanted to follow Jesus' path instead of my own.

And then one night, when I was reading the Bible in my room, something strange happened. In my mind I relived one of the early experiences of rejection that had set me on the path of being a bully.

When the incident happened in real life, I had pushed down the hurt and told myself and anyone else who saw, that I didn't care. I hardened my heart to protect myself. But this time, when I relived the incident, when I got to the hurtful moment, I burst into tears, alone, sitting on the edge of my bed. And I cried for about 10 minutes. I think I let out all the pain that I had been storing up for the previous 2 or 3 years.

And when I had finished crying, I felt lighter and more peaceful. And when I went to school the next day, I felt something I hadn't really felt before, or maybe just not for a long time – I felt love for people.

It was as if God had helped me to let go of my pain, and to be healed, so that I could be free to love people again.

So, as we head into Easter, reflect on the death of Jesus, and think about what pain, what suffering you might want to let go of, in order to be free, in order to walk the path of love, acceptance and forgiveness, as Jesus did.