

Many of us have read the book of Ruth but how many venture back a few chapters?

The previous book, Judges, provides us with a story of chilling contrast to that in Ruth. Chapters 19–21 outline the story of the so-called 'outrage at Gibeah' and the consequent challenge to the whole nation of Israel.

Both the books have female characters. In Ruth, however, the characters come alive — they are people we can touch and relate to. The female character in Judges 19 is totally different. She is unnamed, without character and has a lower status than a donkey.

The crime committed against this woman must be interpreted in its context, but the context is not the Garden of Eden, but patriarchy.

The story seems straightforward enough.

A Levite had a concubine, a kept woman, though it seems in this case that the concubine had significant legal status because the Levite is referred to as the son-in-law.

The Levite's concubine left him and went in search of her family home. There are different accounts of why she left, but the record is clear that she left him not in the best of spirits. After some time, he had gone in search of her and found her at her father's house.

Things seemed quite good at the father's house — the Levite was treated with the hospitality of the day and indeed found it difficult to leave.

Eventually the Levite decides that he has to go and unfortunately for the woman they leave late in the day. They will have to seek hospitality for the night.

It is the Levite, who is termed the master, who decides the whole approach to the journey.

We have only lately begun to give due recognition to those women in the Bible who have suffered in scriptural silence. But, as PETER BENTLEY points out, the culture of 'convenience' which underlies one Old Testament horror story is at work in the permission modern society gives men to objectify women, and to resort to violence.

He rejects the advice of his attendant and has them travel on to a town where the people are Israelites. He does not want to stay with strangers, because he believes that the strangers would not provide the hospitality that is demanded.

The group travels on to Gibeah, an Israelite town of the tribe of Benjamin. Here no

Violence in our midst



Benjamite offers him help and it is therefore with considerable irony that the story relates that the Levite had to accept the hospitality of an old man who is from the same area as himself and is sojourning in Gibeah.

The Levite accepts the man's invitation and the group goes to the man's house.

No sooner are they there than a group of men — who are referred to as wicked, or scoundrels — surrounds the house. They attack the door and try to get in.

The men want the Levite. They want to 'know' him, an indication that they wanted sex with him.

The owner of the house is clearly upset by the demands and tries to negotiate with them. Instead of giving them his guest he offers his daughter, who is a virgin. He in fact says that they



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can do what they wish with her. They can rape her, but he pleads with them not to commit such an outrage against the Levite.

This didn't appease the men, so the Levite takes the situation into his own hands and pushes his concubine outside for them. What happens then is entirely predictable. The writer does not dwell on the events (for whatever motive), but we know that the unnamed woman spent the night being raped and sexually abused.

In the morning the Levite left the safety of the house and ventured out to continue his journey. His concubine was lying at the entrance, where she had fallen from the night of abuse. He was obviously not a person of great compassion — he doesn't even ask her if she is okay. He just instructs her to "Get up." There is no response; she may be dead, but the story is unclear. Anyway, the Levite places her on one of the asses and sets off for home.

The final devastating part of the story occurs at the home of the Levite. He takes a knife (we presume she is dead by this stage, but it is not clear) and he cuts her body into twelve pieces and sends them throughout the

tribes of Israel. All the tribes who receive this 'offering' are horrified, not because of the crime against the woman, but because of the threat to the Levite and the abuse of the hospitality laws.

Like Phyllis Tribble, in her study of passages of violence against women in the Bible, *Texts of Terror*, we should look at the wider context to learn why the unnamed woman suffered thus.

The reason indicated by the story is the need to protect the privilege of hospitality for men. The old man's compliance with the demands of the wicked men would have been a terrible breach of the rules of hospitality.

For the old man it was obviously so terrible that he would rather have sacrificed his daughter to unbelievable terror than have his guest suffer.

This reason, however, does not provide us with any real understanding of how such a situation could arise.

The reason for the terror is the culture which pervaded at the time and still pervades some of our society in some ways today.


Violence is a feature of all societies and it always has been, but at some times it is more dominant than at others. This act in Gibeah reminds one of the recent acts of sexual violence in Australia which have received so much publicity — the shocking Anita Cobby rape and murder and the devastating attack on Janine Baulding.

Though our society does not openly condone such violence, it does have a culture of violence which is accepted — in sport, in domestic situations, on the television and in the media. Unless there are counter messages, some people will interpret this violent culture as okay.

The judge in the Janine Baulding case referred to people who had reached this stage. It seemed they had no traditional understanding of right and wrong. They did what was right in their own eyes. All they did was take an unnamed woman to use for their own pleasure.

A second feature of this story is the absence of authority. There is no meaningful contact with people who declare what is the right thing to do, who teach and direct in positive ways.





Of course not all those who are in authority, whether they be teachers, parents and political leaders, always declare the right things, but at the bottom line we have to accept that there is a need for authority to ensure good order in the whole of society. We all have to work together to ensure that the authority is good.

The most glaring feature of this story is the dominance of patriarchy, a male-dominated culture where women are not accorded equal status.

Women are treated as things — objects or possessions, like a television set, dishwasher, or other convenience item.

What do we do with things? (and when I say we, I mean we men). We use them, and often in that use, we abuse them.

The Levite and the old man treated the women as objects who could be used. They were not equals. They were things to be given away if your own life or being needed protection. This is no heroic story of persons risking their own lives for another. They risk other persons' lives for their own.

Equality is a central feature of the gospel. In Christ there is no male or female. We are equal before God. This story is testament to the need for males to know that we are not of a

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higher status than women. This story has more to tell men than women. Women already know the violence which is committed by men in the name of men.

For most of Australia you only have to check the statistics to realise that men dominate all areas of criminal activity and violence, usually by about 90 percent to 10 percent (women).

When men commit shocking crimes, like at Gibeah several thousand years ago, or today in our neighbourhood, we are confronted by the seeming absence of God. Perhaps we perceive that God the Father is really in collusion with the perpetrators of the crime.

It sounds hopeless, but perhaps some hope can come from greater awareness. We need to

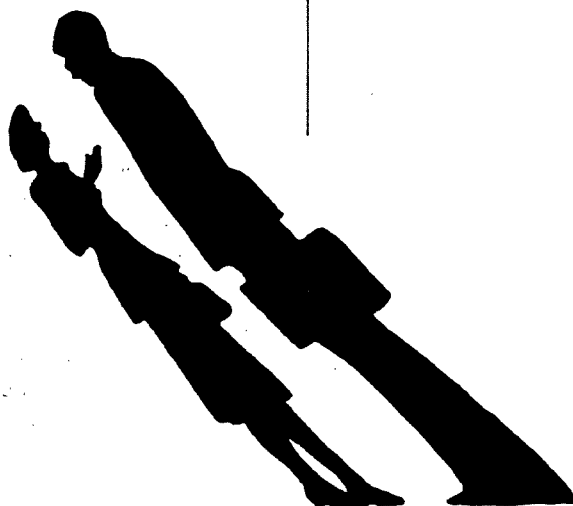
be reminded that God is not male. Indeed God has already shown us the way forward and it is not the way of patriarchy.

The body of Jesus Christ may have been abused and broken by men, but it was for all people. How strange it is that most churches only allow men to perform the ceremony recognising this act of violence.

It also seems odd that with 90 percent of most crimes in Australia being committed by men there is so little public reaction to the violence of men. If 90 percent of the crimes were committed by an ethnic group, there would be mass protest.

Instead it seems that society accepts the committing of violence by a certain group. It is time for men to reconsider their part in the culture of violence, to condemn it and join with the whole of society, especially male leaders in the institutional churches, to make people more aware of the sometimes 'subtle' impact that men have in society and to look for ways to change it.

We need to end the outrages of Gibeah. ■



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