

Bible; the bullet tore through the Bible to almost the last page, but stopped short of injuring him. A few weeks later, Harry was again hit and again survived; this time by his dog tag. Decades later, Harry's son, Roy, said that his father was saved by the hand of God.

In 2012, the cruise ship the Costa Concordia hit rocks near the tiny island of Giglio, off the coast of Tuscany. The vessel had no propulsion and the rudders jammed. The magistrate who led the investigation into the crash told the hearing in Grosseto that it was the hand of God that drew the ship towards the island after the collision, not the captain's manoeuvre. The magistrate said that, 'If there was no wind that night, the ship would have capsized and sunk in a minute (with 4200 people on board)'.

A pope, a soldier and a magistrate spoke of the hand of God. What did they mean? They could not have meant, surely, that God had an appendage at the end of an arm, an appendage with a palm, four fingers and a thumb? Yet, based on personal experience, each said they were saved by the hand of God. I do not mock those who, in the midst of tragedy, claim that God saved or helped them. The problem with this theology, however, is how to explain the fate of those who

were not saved: those who drowned on the Costa Concordia or those who died in the carnage of World War One. I accept that those who believe they have encountered the presence and power of God in their life are genuine; often that experience stems from a life-threatening or life-changing moment. What do we mean by 'the hand of God'?

In our Gospel lesson we heard two stories about honouring the Sabbath, the seventh day which is holy. In the first story, the disciples of Jesus were seen plucking heads of grain as they walked through cornfields. The Pharisees challenged Jesus about this, saying that what His disciples had done was unlawful. His disciples had dishonoured the Sabbath and dishonoured God. In reply, and the reply is important, Jesus cited the example of King David who when hungry, together with his companions entered the house of God and ate the sacred bread of the Presence. This happened, Jesus said, at the time when Abiathar was High Priest. Jesus concludes, 'The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath'. It seems that compassion overrides religious ritual and rules.

Jesus' reply is important because the much of the detail He seemingly gives is wrong. In the First Book of Samuel, David did enter the house of God and he did take the sacred bread but he entered alone, not with his companions, and his motive was not hunger. The High Priest was Ahimelech, not Abiathar. Not only are details wrong, but there is something artificial about the entire story: are we to believe that Pharisees had lain in wait in the hope that Jesus might pass by and that His disciples might pluck some corn? Whatever this story is about, it is not historical. With imagination, we must look elsewhere.

In the second story, Jesus entered a synagogue and met a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees were present, vigilant, waiting and watching Jesus. In anger, Jesus asked them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?' Jesus told the man, 'Stretch out your hand', and it was healed. It is possible that the Pharisees had gathered in the synagogue in order to watch and accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath, but given how artificial the earlier story is I have to wonder about this one also.

And then, there is *midrash*. Midrash is the Jewish practice of re-imagining an earlier, older text and applying it in a later context.

There is a fine line between re-imagining an earlier text, re-interpreting it, and writing new Scripture but this is the world of the Bible, and of the Gospels in particular. The early church community drew upon the *Tanakh*, what we know as the Old Testament, in order to understand and portray the message and character of Jesus. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses said to the people, 'The LORD God freed you from [Egypt] with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD has commanded you to observe the Sabbath'. In the Old Testament, in one story, a mighty hand, an outstretched arm and teaching about the Sabbath. In the Old Testament, the Sabbath is connected to the Exodus, to release, freedom and living at one, at peace, with God.

But more significant than the Book of Deuteronomy, is there a story in the Old Testament in which a prophet confronts those in authority, a story involving a hand being stretched forth, a hand which is withered and a hand which is restored? While the details are not identical, in the First Book of Kings, there is such a story. It is from First Kings that the writer of the Gospel of Mark drew material. In First Kings and in Mark, the life of the prophet is threatened. The earlier story demonstrates the power of the prophet in the face of the

religious authorities. The theme of release, a hand restored, of exodus and new life, is deliberate. Mark surely meant that too.

If you are still with me, where does this lead us? I am respectful but cautious about the phrase 'the hand of God' popularly understood, but here in Scripture we have heard of the hands of the disciples plucking corn. The plucking of the corn is central to the story.

Having plucked the corn, it is their hands which provide the food, the sustenance for life. These are spiritual stories and must be read spiritually. For the early church, in that first century, it was from the hands of the disciples that the first community was fed and by their hands the clay of the church was shaped and moulded.

The healing of the withered hand reveals the presence and power of God to release us from all that constraints and diminishes us spiritually. Perhaps Mark is suggesting that it was the religious ritual and rules of the Pharisees which had withered the hand of God, the hand which was meant for release and new life. Mark is also saying that though we be withered, constrained or diminished, in Jesus we will find healing, wholeness, completion and salvation. In

the mind's eye, stand in that synagogue; experience the presence of Jesus for yourself.

For me, the hand of God is not so much a deliberate action on the part of God, stopping a bullet or blowing a ship to the shore. For me, the hand of God is an inner experience; it is a perspective on reality. The pope, the soldier and the magistrate may be right; in a sense, they truly felt God's Presence. What matters in this life is our receptivity to God, to the Sacred, and the more attentive, open and alert we are to God's presence, God's beauty and God's peace, the more we will be attuned to God's power, influence and leading in life. The sixteenth century Jesuit and mystic, Jean Pierre de Caussade encourages us to waste time with God; he said:

If we understood how to see in each moment some manifestation of the will of God we should find therein also all that our hearts could desire.....The present is ever filled with infinite treasure, it contains more than you have the capacity to hold.

In the Celtic tradition, mindful that the earth itself is a sacrament, a means of grace, St Patrick wrote:

I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the starlit heaven.
The glorious sun's life-giving ray,

The whiteness of the moon at even.
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable-earth, the deep salt sea.
Around the old eternal rocks.

If our life is to be charged with meaning, to have depth and experience spiritual growth, to encounter the Sacred, we must continually expand our awareness of the Holy. We too will experience the hand of God if we are alert, alive, to it; sensitive to it. Through Scripture, the hands of the disciples continue to feed us. If we stand in the synagogue, we too will experience the life-changing Presence and power of Jesus.

Amen.