

Good Morning!

I've called this who is excluded by God?

We're doing this series called, tales of inclusion and exclusion and I wanted to set up a scene for going forwards, thinking about how we sort of wrangle the bits of Scripture that are difficult and sometime just plain weird to our understanding of God.

I thought I'd get it over and done with because I don't want every week to be complicated biblical stuff, and it's really important that we can think more practically in other weeks about how to apply the bible, and how we think about inclusion and exclusion in specific terms – say thinking about disability.

But I first wanted to do this wrangling with you.

So first I want to explain that I found writing this hard.

I find it hard sometimes doing these sorts of things. I find it complicated when I'm writing sermons like this because I'm trying to be true to two parts of my knowledge and understanding.

That is I need to recognise two things: First, my brain when researching is focussed often on the idea that what we have is a collection of texts written in different contexts.

They address different issues, which is why they sometimes don't seem to add up.

You know, the writer of Deuteronomy is writing to a completely different audience to the writer of Amos or the writer of Isaiah or the writer of Job.

These books are written across a vast amount of time and they're not written to the same people, and they often have different aims. And though they interact, they are unique to themselves.

So it's easy for me in a way or when I'm in my biblical scholar brain to just go look, it's Deuteronomy, it's the this is just about Canaanite cultic religion and we don't need to worry about it.

But as a Christian, that doesn't help me because this whole set of books is our canon.

And we need to wrestle with all of them.

And we do read them as one set of books that weave together in complicated ways.

We need to be not too worried when they get tangled up. The biblical scholarly thing can help us there it can help us not worry so much, but at the same time, this is the story of the people of God and it is the precursor to our stories about Jesus. So we do need to be thinking about how they work together.

Hopefully today I can help you and hopefully this will help me, I'm gonna try my best to find a thread that goes through things but if you see me getting myself in knots, that's okay. You don't have to get in the knots that I get in.

Just think 'Aw poor woman has too much stuff in her brain' and move on.

It's just the place that I live and I really hope it hasn't got in the way of saying something useful today.

The other caveat today is simply that I am going to talk about the canon and we do need to not get stuck talking about the New Testament as though it is completely different from the Old Testament, or thinking that the NT revises everything that happens, it's just not as

straightforward as that in Old Testament there were all these laws that excluded people but New Testament and Jesus arrives, no more exclusion we're done.

The idea that the god of the old testament is violent and in the new testament its all nice, just isn't true. But its also rooted in a kind of anti-judiasm that when we are thinking about exclusion it would be sad for us to fall into.

And it doesn't help us when we read these hard bits of the bible to just throw them out, because we then miss any of the good bits (which we will talk about next time) and it doesn't help us when we talk to people outside of the church.

So that being said, Last week we finished if you remember with Philip baptising the Ethiopian eunuch, and I talked about why he was an example of the Bible sometimes undoing its own exclusions.

In one short passage if you remember Luke, the author of Acts, both references a text where a eunich is excluded and then re-included by God.

he references a part of Isaiah that leads us to think about the exclusion in Deuteronomy of eunuchas and also the RE-inclusion of Eunuchs in God's plan.

Lets dive a little deeper into these issues of exclusion today.

We are going to talk about disability in more detail in a couple of weeks time, and how we practically might be influenced by ideas of these things in the texts, but today is sort of an overview, I guess, bit of a wrangling with just the whole concept of exclusion and inclusion being in the Bible.

Because much of what happens in public Christian discourse at the moment is actually about exclusion and inclusion, not just gender, but disability and race.

we have to think about those people who want to point to places in the Bible which do exclude and say that that's what we should copy – I saw a tweet from a large church leader in the US this week saying that certain neuro-diversities were sin – she seemed to want us to look at places of exclusion and merely map them on to a modern context without thought.

and we need to think about what our feeling is about that use of scripture - , how do we think about that when some of that stuff is in there?

So we're going to talk about lots of things over the next few months, but today, we're just going to tip out toes into issues of exclusion today see if we can find any thing we can build on.

So sometimes you know, I am happily reading through my Bible and I come across a passage like this.

Deut 23: No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

Those born of an illicit Union shall not be admitted the assembly of the Lord even to the 10th generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

No ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, even to the 10th generation. None of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt and because they hired against you Balam son of bore from Petha of Mesopotamia to curse you. Yet the Lord your God refused to heed Balam the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you. You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live but you shall not abhor any of the Edomites they are your kin. You shall not abhor any Egyptian because you were an alien residing in their land, the children of the third generation that are brought into them maybe admitted to the assembly of the Lord.

Didn't think that you would get talk of genitalia this early on in the service did you?

but we went right there.

So this is a whole section that is about who we can exclude and include and it carries on - this goes right through a whole section of Deuteronomy about who can be included who cant in Israel.

So some of it is about rituals, what people can do in service of God and some of it is a bout more general idea of who can be included in Israel in general.

we're probably used to ideas that there are rules about impurity and uncleanness. And we've explored that a little bit when we looked at Levitical laws about sexual practices that were said to make people unclean a couple of years ago.

We know this is part of Leviticus and Deuteronomy -

But one of the things that we want to think about is, is this just the Old Testament, and if so can we just ignore it?

Can we do that?

no, we can't because despite these verses that we'll look at in a moment, there are things in the New Testament that have ways of excluding people. And in the Old Testament, there are ways of including people, that we need to witness.

So lets look at the OT

What we have in our Old Testament is different books that talk about uncleanness who's included who's excluded.

One of the main questions at the beginning pf these texts is who is Israel?

And Who is not Israel?

At various points through the history of the people of Israel it is defined in different ways.

So when we think about Deuteronomy, we're starting with people in a very small cultic situation, the Assembly of God and the people of God coming out into Canaan. They might be nomadic at the time, they're moving around and the covenant is constructed to give a secure basis to who is of YHWH and why we aren't like the worshippers of other Gods.

, if we're in Kings and Chronicles, we're thinking about people in a temple – how will we, the dominant people treat others and how will they know YHWH is great. In a lot of our war texts the exclusion comes at the price of death of others. Cleanliness of the NATION is at stake not merely the temple.

And then when we get to something like, you know, the major prophets or we're thinking about the Psalms, we think about people who've been exiled and the question is 'how can we keep ourselves pure in a foreign land – where other people ask us to do things that seem to go against God.'

So we've got quite a span of history and people at different points. BUT also different questions through which the issues of who is in and who is out get filtered.

But what we see most of the time is two main reasons that people get excluded or included into the people of God. Two main reasons for the rules being constructed as they are, rules that seem outlandish to us.

One is cultic. That is, practices to do with services in the temple. And what will defile the temple of God and what won't defile the temple of God or what will defile the priesthood of God

and the other thing that we've got is Community Preservation - this is about how the people of Israel are boundaried.

How do we know who is in and who is out when it comes to Israel?

because an awful lot of our books including the New Testament letters (especially say 1 Peter or the Timothy's and my fave, 1 Corinthians) are actually about that how do we keep ourselves pure in a world that does not worship our God?

So examples of cultic preservation – preserving holiness might be for example, Deuteronomy 23 that I we've talked about.

We have this edict about eunuchs, or men who are consider their genitalia to have been damaged or mutilated in some way.

They Cannot be part of the priesthood. They can't act as the Assembly of God.

And that's a cultic ruling,

Or we might think of having to perform rituals after sex with a menstruating woman before acting as priest or after ejaculation for the same reason. Purity is imagined bodily and that needs sorting out before anyone can serve God – which also means some people will never be able to serve as priests. Their physicality excludes them

But a community ruling would be the passage about the Moabites. And how the Moabites can't be part of the community, even to their 10th generation as they're not pure enough to be part of what's in and what's out. See also the amalakites we're told that they are not allowed. We've got those edicts about not suffering a witch to live, or certain acts being worthy of you being thrown out because it doesn't uphold the community rules that keep them safe in a world that doesn't follow Gods laws.

Most of these laws, particularly the ones I'm talking about, now, say Deuteronomy and Leviticus come from what we consider the earliest parts of our biblical literature.

. So one of the things that's interesting for me about that is that this isn't too different to how we how we 'other' people, today,

how we define ourselves as communities, how we separate ourselves out, and show we offer something different to the world around us.

And certainly it's very similar to the debates going on in churches.

We have two debates going on just in the Baptist Union on LGBTQ people.

there are questions about whether someone can be Christian and LGBTQ, whether that makes them part of the community, can they truly take part in the community if they're gay, or trans or non binary?

That's a community boundary rule.

But also then there's the other one, which is can they be ministers? Can someone gay and married enact the role of minister, and do weddings etc?

So the first one is about community boundaries, and the second one is about cultic behaviour. It's about ritual behaviour. It's about who can do the things that we consider the most holy among us.

It's not so different from this debate going on in our Biblical texts – some people can be inside the community, but not fully access all the roles available.

Now..... it's wrong for us to think that these are blindly then applied throughout the whole of Israelite history until the New Testament when Jesus and Paul undo them,

because Jesus reinforces temple purity laws at various places when he's healed people. He knows that cleanliness for the man with leprosy needs to be accepted by the community, that exclusion isn't just to do with a physical barrier but acceptance by the community as well (we'll come back to this in later weeks).

Inclusion and exclusion are not merely personal, but they are about the group.

And Paul and Peter bring debates over circumcision into the heart of the early church -and it isn't clear for a long time.

It's a debate in Judaism in the first century about converts to Judaism that is seen in various other writings from the time of our New testament....people aren't sure what barriers or boundaries should be enforced.

And though we see the winner in early Christianity to be Paul, those places in Acts, Romans, Corinthians and Galatians show us exclusions and inclusions being acted out, debated and judged.

The vice lists in Corinthians and Ephesians of people who are excessive in their behaviours, also speak to community rules about who is included.

So slanderers, the gluttons, the drunks, those who go to sexual excess – these indulgences that Paul excludes from the kingdom of heaven echo the various words of the cultic purity laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus but also the debates of the minor prophets like Amos and Micah about what you should be doing and how you should be behaving as a group.

You shouldn't be drunkard ,you shouldn't be a slanderer, you shouldn't be wasting your riches, you should be looking after the poor for example.

I want to bring in a weird story from the New Testament now because I think again, it's important for us to trace these threads of community through the whole thing.

This is the strange case of ananias and saphira.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). ³⁷ He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

5 *But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ² with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ 'Ananias,' Peter asked, 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us^[a] but to God!' ⁵ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men came and wrapped up his body,^[b] then carried him out and buried him.*

⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter said to her, 'Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.' And she said, 'Yes, that was the price.'⁹ Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.'¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things

They are asked as everyone is to bring everything in common so that the church can be pure, one community that works together, lives together and holds everything together.

A new people of God.

But ananias and saphira decide to lie, and so they are struck dead.

Now, that sounds like a very, in inverted commas, Old Testament story to me. We don't talk about it very often because we like to think that these things don't happen once Jesus arrived, but they happen here.

I've never fully understood this story.

It doesn't fit for me with how things should be done after the resurrection. It feels very judgemental and it is scary. (though it does fit with lukes telling of the story of the rich young ruler and teaching on money).

I've read lots of people try to argue that Ananias and Saphira sort of will themselves to death out of fright, to avoid seeing this as an 'old testament god' type story.

But here it is and it is that type of story.

And I like to wrangle with the point of narratives more than anything else.

I think it actually it makes sense, when you think of what is happening right before: Peter and the apostles are setting up a new people of God, the narrative in Acts has just shown us the beginnings of a new community of Jesus, the fulfillment of various prophecies.

The story echoes this idea of community protectionism.

Right at the beginning of the establishment of the church -there can be nobody who is not fully pure, fully involved fully holy.

This lying and cheating brings judgement.

Peter is setting up a new community on day one and ananias and saphira disrupt the primary goal of the community which is to have everything in common. The judgement we see meted out lines up with view of keeping a community pure.

Paul similarly, when he talks about how to do the Lord's Supper, and what people should wear or how they should behave, is creating a new form of cultic purity.

He has a man thrown out of the community of Corinth because he is sleeping with his father's wife and refuses to repent, Paul makes rules about how legal battles should be done
INSIDE THE COMMUNITY.

But these rules are ones concerned not with bodily purity, say thinking about eunuchs or menstruation or those sorts of things.

But this new community purity, is centred on the holiness of a **spiritual body** together before God.

patriarchy and protectionism is the main driver behind many of the communities that our texts are written in.

We have to take those contexts into consideration

These complex new testament stories are hard to fit with our ideas of radical inclusion and you might feel a bit bleak by now....sorry....But when we see these threads, We can recognise not only the similarities between ancient Israelite religion and early Christianity but our own communities and the way we may have created boundaries that exclude within our own communities.

The need to form boundaries is a natural one. Some ways of protecting what we love are good and some ways are bad.

Some boundaries are good – a church is a community centred on the worship of Jesus Christ.

Anyone can be part of a church, but it does have a centre its trying to maintain.

communities often have boundaries by accident.

Some boundaries are ones we inherit.

– we inherit a set of thoughts, or a way of doing our rituals, we inherit physical spaces and leadership structures.

We don't even see that we're creating them until someone writes them down.

Worshipping God and doing it in a holy way is a good motivation for building questions of exclusion and inclusion.

But how then do we understand or apply that without recreating things that seem violent or exclusionary now?

What do we do with all the rules?

do we need to protect the purity of our churches or worshipping assembly as some people would say we do?

Do we take these rules and say that what they show is that God is interested in community holiness above all else?

Should we care about that?

And do we do that by excluding those who don't measure up to these verses in the Bible as some people definitely think we should?

Now you know me well enough to think that I'm about to say, No, we shouldn't be excluding people like that.

But I'm saying no, not because we're going to pretend that these things aren't in our Bible. But with we are going to be better scholars of religion than people who simply read one verse and think it applies to everything.

We are going to weigh scripture against scripture.

We don't have one book, but a conversation of books.

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When we look deeper and further in with the help of say, our feminist scholars or liberation scholars, or our dissenting theologians that are hidden in your Baptist past, we see this other narrative that changes how we think about exclusion into a pattern of inclusion.

The Bible is patriarchal because of its context, and protectionist in the way it talks about gods people because of its practical needs when it was written.

and a lot of what is complicated for us to understand now is due to that.

But what feminists and liberation scholars show us is there's a parallel narrative inside our text,

moments of subversion, extraordinary accounts,

moments where we see women, and foreigners,

and those places where the rules are broken and blessing rolls forth not in spite of them,

but because of them.

In Leviticus, and just after this bit about the Moabites in Deuteronomy, we are told by God that we have to include the alien within our bounds, look after them, keep them because we also were foreigners. Gods covenant requires recognition that we need to look after others, because the people of Israel were looked after.

In Isaiah as I read to you last week, the eunuch, previously excluded because of how their body is, becomes welcomed if they are someone who worships God, and given a better

inheritance, apparently, than those people who just got to be part of Israel and have lots of children.

In the book of Ruth, we see the Moabite woman representative of so many types of othering within the story, transformed into the progenitor of the line of David.

There are women excluded by men from getting blessings, those who haven't had children particularly, who are over and over given promises by God that they will have joy and be included in Israel's history. And we're gonna look at that a bit later to next week, not next week, a couple of weeks time.

And Paul, for all the rules he seems to have about what should be good behaviour, gives a simple way not to be excluded that relies only on us being part of the body of Christ. He tells us to pursue being mastered by Christ instead of anything else - and this is a way out of our excesses, like the drinking and gluttony and sexual practices that are based on power, to give power back to God.

And then in Galatians, despite all the complexities of what law is or isn't in Romans, he writes to his friends and simply tells them that in Christ, there is no Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free. We are simply all one in Christ.

Throughout the narrative of our entire canon, there are rules given to protect the people of God and help them be holy, and THEN places where the prophets undermine those for the sake of the excluded, the outcast, the child, the vulnerable and the refugee.

There is a constant wrangling going on of what it means to act in a holy way in each new context that arises - from nomadic tribal religion in the desert to an established temple kingdom to a dispersed Jewish sect in the Roman Empire.

Everything is always being debated.

At all points, (as we'll discover next time when we think about how God sees the excluded,) the laws and boundaries that seem final are thrown out when blessing might come from someone else – Rahab the prostitute for example.

Or Ruth.

The negotiation is constant when a new situation arises....the people of God have to take stock and decide how to apply their ideas of holiness to the new land they find themselves in.

I hope I've shown you a little of how the biblical thoughts on inclusion and exclusion are set up.

I tried had to find threads that make sense of what we have in our canon.

And though I've said everything is negotiated I did find one constant group who are excluded by God and one who are included.

Its not easy to hear tho.

Now, I promise I prepped this before the mini budget came out, but I decided to leave it in despite that.

there is one set of inclusions and exclusions that exist quite clearly in the Bible.

One judgement that is consistent throughout nearly every book from the mighty Major Prophets to Revelation and never stops being part of what the people of God have to answer for.

Hair cuts and genitalia, marriage, family lines, priesthood and foreigners. All these are problems that the Bible throws up in debates.

And they are the ones we like to focus on in moral outrage, I think because actually they are really easy to either obey or disobey.

But one group God is not up for any debate about:

the poor are always included as those who must be looked after.

The phrase widows and orphans in our texts is repeated often especially in the minor prophets, and what it means is the most vulnerable and the most undefended - because women and children without family have no defence and no way of making money in an ancient world context. So widows and orphans must always be protected - the most vulnerable, the most most undefended must always be helped. If we have to take one line through who is excluded, God continually condemns those who do not care for the poor.

And God always has the poor and most vulnerable right at the centre of any rules that are being made.

The rich person who does not give away their money to help the poor is nearly always excluded.

This is made clear in Amos when he talks to Israel and says that Israel won't get to reap its riches, because the poor are neglected, it's in Isaiah where God rejects the offerings and rituals of those with innocent blood on their hands, it's in Proverbs *Proverbs 21:13 Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered.* We are told through to say, the echoes of this when Jesus talks to the rich young ruler and brushes away his obedience to the law by adding giving what he has to the poor and Matthew 25, the scariest bit of the Bible, I think, the sheep and the goats.

The poor and vulnerable are the most excluded in all societies, and the most remembered throughout our scriptures.

What's interesting about most of these edicts is that they rarely come to individuals, by the way, they are to religious groups, to the community, to the leaders of cities and the towns, we have collective responsibility.

Saying that we have obeyed the laws of God and worshipped Him. But we've neglected the vulnerable makes no sense.

No theological way out is ever really given

The Psalms and Proverbs condemn those who do not look after the poor, and, even the statement of Paul about the Lord's Supper condemning us if we don't make sure the poor in

our community are fed as well as the rich, echoes Amos's pleas for justice for the vulnerable in the city of God.

Holiness may look like many types of ritual or sacrifice – but its relevance is governed by one thing most consistently – how we look after the 'poor'.

In conclusion,

the Bible has strange exclusions and radical inclusions all the way through it.

It's not just Jesus that undoes rules but the prophets and the judges, God is complicated and the texts are also.

those rules for exclusion may seem foolish to us from where we stand....

But my question is, where have we created our own rules and are they still fit for purpose?

What can be a blessing and who God can move through cannot be predicted by us.

Instead, our job is to look at what we've inherited as community rules and question whether they really do build our community with God at the centre, as they were meant to in the first place.

Our challenge is not to look at the Bible and ask “who does it say to include and who does it say to exclude” - it won't give you that answer.

And why would we be looking for a reason to exclude anyway?

Our challenge, I would say, is to look at the exclusions and inclusions in the Bible - and ask

Where are the ‘widows and orphans’, the vulnerable for us –

“What does holiness actually look like for us as the people of God in Leeds, 2022?”

and then we ask

how then do we today create a holy place?