



...Unto the third generation

"The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, but by no means clears the guilty, and shall visit the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation."

Thus, the Book of Numbers.

I should add, though, that this is just one side of the debate that goes on in the Old Testament. Prophets, like Ezekiel, argue that if there is a sin to be judged, then it does not pass on to the next generation: "It is only the person who sins who shall die:... if a man does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live, says the LORD God."

Most modern readers find Ezekiel's attitude infinitely preferable: why should the grandchildren be punished for the sins of their grandparents?

All well and good, except when it comes to our treatment of the environment, we have rather taken it upon ourselves to be like the God of the Book of Numbers.

However hot things get this summer, I suspect that in the next twenty years, things won't be really bad. We may even smile and find the hot summers enjoyable; there are winners as well as losers in climate change, and in the short term, there are a lot of winners. If you're selling ice cream, sun lotion or rose wine, you're doing pretty well in England right now.

But the thing is, it's not going to be a cyclical, is it?

For sure, next summer will surely be colder, but we're on an upward trend.

No, the time when it's going to get really bad will be 2060 or 2070. That will be when the increase in temperature will have messed things up so that Norfolk is regularly flooded and the old crops all over the south of England can't grow any more because they are parched. And this is just thinking of our own country: try living in a heat wave in India right now. People just die; especially if they are poor. It's fundamentally cruel and unjust.

That's the thing. Everyone agrees that some of the attitudes of the God presented in parts of the Old Testament are appalling. How could you think God was so cruel, seeking vengeance on children yet unborn, for sins being committed now, and not get irate about it? And yet that is exactly what we humans are doing at the moment. We have taken God's place environment-wise, and turned the world into a chemistry set. We don't have to worry too much: we'll be gone by the time that things are awful.

Rather, outlying summers like this year's are a wake up call. For sure, it's an odd one; not every year will be like this, but all the science indicates that this is the future direction. What future do we want? There are things we can still do, probably sacrificial things, but it will mean our own sins don't extend to the third or fourth generation. Which is better, isn't it?