Our two readings this morning disturb a commonly held view: that the Old Testament is all about vengeance and retribution, and the New Testament all about compassion and forgiveness.

Ecclesiasticus—or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach—from which our first reading was taken, was composed in the second century BC, that is, at least one hundred years before the birth of our Jesus. Listen again to what it says:

Anger and wrath, these also are abominations,
and the sinful man will possess them.

He that takes vengeance will suffer vengeance from the Lord,
and will firmly establish his sins.

Forgive your neighbour the wrong he has done,
and then yours sins will be pardoned when you pray.

Does a man harbour anger against another,
and yet seek healing from the Lord?

Does he have no mercy toward a man like himself,
and yet pray for his own sins? (Ecclesiasticus 27.30-28.3)

Now listen to our reading from the New Testament’s Revelation to John:

I saw the seven angels who stand before God …. And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon a golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God. Then the angel
took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. (Revelation 8: 2a, 3-5)

Who are the saints whose prayers rise to God with the smoke of the incense rising from the hand of the angel? According to the previous chapter:

Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?.... These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (Revelation 7: 13a, 14b)

The saints here are the Christians who had suffered persecution and martyrdom, probably during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian in the late 1st century AD. They are the ones who, in Chapter 6, cried out, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon earth?” (Revelation 6: 10). This is the prayer that rises with the incense, in our reading. And this is the prayer that is answered by the final coming of the terrible judgement of God, symbolised by fire, thunder, lightning, and earthquake.

So: the Old Testament urges us to let go of vengeance and to forgive, while the New Testament commends to us the picture of martyred Christians praying for vengeance. It seems that the biblical message about vengeance and forgiveness is more complicated than we, perhaps, tend to think. Let me do what I can to clarify things in the next few minutes.

There are several good reasons why we should forswear vengeance. One of them Ecclesiasticus states right at the end of our reading and in the verses following:

    a man given to anger will kindle strife,

    and a sinful man will disturb friends

    and inject enmity among those who are at peace....

    a hasty quarrel kindles fire,

    and urgent strife sheds blood.

If you blow on a spark, it will glow. (Ecclesiasticus 28: 8b-9, 11-12a)

Vengeance is socially contagious and it tends to run out of control. It’s socially dangerous, inclining toward bloodshed. That’s one good reason to keep clear of it.
But another has less to do with its external, social effects, than its internal, personal ones. Vengeance poisons the one who entertains it. The most powerful illustration of this, known to me, comes in a play by Peter Shaffer. Shaffer, you might remember, was the author of *Amadeus*. In one of his lesser known plays, *The Gift of the Gorgon*, Edward Damson, hot-blooded playwright of Slavo-Celtic parentage, champions the cleansing, cathartic virtue of the passion for revenge. Liberal forbearance and tolerance, in his eyes, is “just giving up with a shrug—as if you never really cared about the wrong in the first place ... *Avoidance*, that’s all it is! ...”¹ But to this Helen, his wife and cool daughter of an English classics don, retorts:

You go on about passion, Edward. But have you never realised that there are many, many kinds?—Including a passion to kill our own passion when it’s wrong ... The truest, hardest most adult passion isn’t just stamping and geing ourselves up. It’s refusing to be led by rage when we most want to be ... No other being in the universe can change itself by conscious will: it is our privilege alone. To take out inch by inch this spear in our sides that goads us on and on to bloodshed—and still make sure it doesn’t take our guts with it. ²

At the very end of the play, Helen wins the argument by showing that it is forgiveness, not vengeance, that requires the greater strength and makes the greater peace. But there is a moment when, enraged by a macabre trick that Edward has played on her, Helen sways on the brink of plunging into vengeance. What pulls her back are the words of her stepson, Philip: “The truth is,” he says, “you must forgive him or die”.³

This is perhaps a little melodramatic, and a bit simplistic, but the point is valid; namely, that to feed on resentment and dream dreams of revenge is to do immediate damage to ourselves. It makes us hard and bitter. It renders us incapable of taking hold of constructive opportunities, because we are so obsessed with exploiting destructive ones.

One particular picture of carefully nursed resentment haunts me. The object of resentment was Myra Hindley, who was involved in the cold-blooded murder of some children in Yorkshire in 1965. Until her death in prison in 2002, several campaigns for her release were launched. Whenever this hit the television news, pleas from Hindley’s advocates were invariably balanced by an interview with the mother of one of the murdered children. In the interview that sticks in my mind, the mother looks the journalist straight in the eyes and, unblinking, declares that she has made it her life’s work to ensure that Hindley never walks free. The unrelenting force of her hatred is
almost palpable. And when, in the aftermath of the failure of each attempt to secure Hindley’s release, she was canvassed for her feelings, the look of satisfaction on her face was terrible to behold. It was very real, very dense. But it had the density of sheer negativity. It was a kind of hellish concentration of destructiveness. I don’t know the state of Myra Hindley’s soul, but one look at that mother’s face persuaded me that she had surely lost hers. The truth is, we must forgive or die.

So there are good reasons to steer clear of vengeance. What sense, then, can we make of the notion, presented in our New Testament reading, that Christians should pray for it?

Well, history leaves so many grave wrongs un-righted. Murderers die in their beds, while their victims lie in their unmarked graves. More often than not, in this world, justice is not done. And this offends us deeply. As I became aware when I went to see Andrzej Wajda’s 2007 film, *Katyn*, about the mass-murder of about 20,000 Polish intellectuals and leaders by the Soviets in 1940. After the end of the film, which stuns with horror, I stumbled into the light muttering to myself, “There has to be a hell, there has to be a reckoning, for Stalin and all his assembly-line murderers”. But if there is a reckoning, it certainly isn’t in history. Stalin’s innocent victims remain very dead; and he himself died in his own bed (albeit not comfortably). Therefore we pray, O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge the blood of the murdered innocent?

So what should Christians do? Should we foreswear vengeance or pray for it? Or should we somehow do both?

The basic step toward a coherent answer is, I think, to distinguish ‘vengeance’ from ‘retribution’. In English ‘vengeance’ connotes a passion that is running out of control, the kind that starts with anger and ends in slaughter. It’s the spark that glows and then bursts into flame. By definition ‘vengeance’ is immoderate and intemperate. It’s incapable of being discriminate and proportionate. It poisons within and wreaks destruction without. We have to foreswear it both for the sake of those around us, and for the sake of our own souls.

Retribution, in contrast, need not be vengeful or vindictive. It need not aim to inflict upon the wrong-doer an equality of suffering—and more—just for the sheer pleasure of it.

It can, in principle, suffer control, strictly aiming to vindicate the innocent victim by communicating to the wrong-doer that he must repent and repair. And it can even suffer
control by love, showing a measure of compassion to the wrong-doer, wooing him to repent for the sake of reconciliation.

In this way, retribution is quite distinct from vengeance, for, far from being recklessly vindictive, it is deliberately loving. So we cannot simply foreswear it, for sometimes we are obliged to carry it out—for the sake of the victim and the perpetrator together. Sometimes, however, we cannot carry it out, because we lack the power—because the murdered victims are beyond our saving and their murderers are beyond our apprehension. Then we must do what the saints in the Book of Revelation do, and pray God to do what we cannot and to bring his judgement and do his justice.

It’s true that our reading tells us that the saints pray God, not only to judge, but also to ‘avenge’—which muddies my waters a bit. But, given what we know about God from Jesus, we may take it, I think, that God’s ‘vengeance’ will not be intemperate, indiscriminate, and disproportionate, and that it will be loving and compassionate. God’s ‘vengeance’ will be what I have called ‘retribution’. Nevertheless, the verb ‘avenge’ does connote some heat and fierceness, and it reminds us that retribution, even when loving, can be stern and forceful. It also suggests, perhaps, that not every wrong-doer will survive it, that not every wrong-doer will get the message, repent, and be saved. It suggests that, for some, despite the love of God, there may still be hell.

So what should Christians do? We should always forswear vengeance. But we should mete out retribution, justly and lovingly, when we can. And when we cannot, we should pray God to do it instead.

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2 Ibid., pp. 60-61.
3 Ibid., p. 92.