

Lent 2 sermon- March 13th

In her book, 'Christianity Without Religion', Diana Butler Bass identified four events that had eroded traditional belief in God as we entered a new millennium, like child abuse by the RC priesthood, covered up by bishops and cardinals. All events led to the same exasperated question in the minds of those whose faith was wavering or had completely evaporated: 'Where was God'? Had she written her book today instead of 2005, she would, I'm sure, have added fifth and sixth events: 9/11 and - now- the war crimes of President Putin, prosecuted during his invasion of Ukraine and including the bombing of a maternity hospital. Once again many are asking, "Where is God"? The pictures of human misery we see happening today affect our image of God.

This [*I held up a metre-long poster*] is the panoramic view of the walled city of Jerusalem that a group of us saw on our pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1985. Jesus would have seen much the same scene, 2000-odd years ago, had he stood where we were standing. Bethany and the Mt of Olives were favourite haunts and could well have been the setting for today's Gospel, Luke's account (Ch13 v 31-35) of what Jesus was thinking as he looked out over the city. He produces a devastating review, the sort those in the travel industry dread reading in Trip Advisor, describing it as a 'house forsaken' (RSV).

What did Jesus find so distressing then?

It wasn't the buildings, streets or landscape: it was the actions of those in power. The City of David was supposed to be a beacon of hope and fount of justice but had serially disappointed. It contained a vast temple, built by the Herodian dynasty, but left in the icy grip of a priesthood that kept the people at veil's length from their Maker. There were those content with the status quo, the Pharisees, who were happy to live by a rulebook that lacked words such as 'compassion' and 'love'. When a posse came along with superficial concern for Jesus' safety, urging him to avoid entering Jerusalem, He flipped his lid. He had come to the City to gather people together in the name of a God whose hallmarks were love and compassion, as a hen would gather its brood: He found not one but a crowd of foxes in the hen run. Jerusalem was supposed to be the fulcrum of God's plan but had unravelled to become a place of fear, extortion and corruption, occupied by a pagan army. There was nothing

wrong with the location, only the people who controlled it.

There was, additionally, an intensely personal reason for his lament. Jerusalem was to be the hostile arena where He made his stand for peaceful and just relationships between neighbours. Someone had to put a fresh case for Creator and Creation. He was convinced that peace would come but it had to begin with him leading the way.

[this was a cue for our 'Gradual song', Tom Paxton's 'Peace will come: with the chorus line '---let it begin with me!']

Our view from the Mount of Olives in 1985 differed in one respect from that which Jesus found so distressing: it had become dominated by the enormous, golden 'Dome of the Rock' or Mosque of Akbar, built in the 7thC and oldest monument of a rival religion, Islam. The emergence of Islam has a long and complex history but one of the driving forces was that Christianity was losing its way. Marriage to the Roman state had muddied waters that once baptised. Peace and justice had been pushed firmly onto a back burner as Christian and Muslim fought for dominance. Had Jesus stood beside us in 1985, he would have had an added reason to lament.

The view today has a third distressing aspect. A 708km long precast concrete wall surrounds the old city, separating it into Jewish and Arab enclaves. Poor Arabs, who have menial jobs in the city, have to queue for ages at checkpoints every day to get to work. I'm not sure if any part is visible from Bethany, but if Jesus stood alongside today's pilgrims on the Mt of Olives, the tears would still flow profusely at the very thought of it. It would seem that Jerusalem, like Jesus, is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow but with a glaring difference. Whereas those with power over the people seem forever bent on self-destruction, unwilling to recognise an inclusive, compassionate creator, and tearing the city apart in self-interest, Jesus' mission is still trying to unite people as a single, loving brood.

The self-interest of Judaism has a long but questionable history, going right back to the book of Genesis and today's appointed OT reading. In Gen. 15 v 18, we read "On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying, 'to your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, Euphrates". For those who read their bible literally, there is no doubt: God made a binding promise of real estate to

Abram and his offspring, a fertile land, forever theirs.

But who wrote this, when and why? It was composed 1000's of years after the alleged event, when reform-minded, dictator kings ordered priests to consolidate ancient oral traditions into a written text. That text inevitably gilded the historical lily- it was always good for your prospects to please a King. The storytellers composed an alleged hotline communication between God and Abram, as received in a vision. But as the story unfolds, it is easy to forget that rather nebulous and unlikely context. 'Religion' has cast the story in a tablet of stone but was it ever a divine justification for displacing another people from their homeland? Is there misinformation here? I don't want to push the similarities too far but does v.18 contain discomfoting elements of Putin's vision for Ukraine?

The Genesis passage is used by Orthodox Jews and Christian Fundamentalists – the ultra-religious - to justify the current imbalance of power in Israel: both parties welcome the prospect of complete supremacy, as a sign of the 'end of times'. God's covenant: made yesterday for today and tomorrow. However, the vision of Jesus can bring peace, any day of the week in any city of the world, if enough of His followers say 'let it begin with me!'

We are today's brood and it's worth remembering how quickly chicks grow. Within a year or two, they can be spreading wings over a brood of their own. Note the compassion being shown the multitudes of refugees by people in countries neighbouring Ukraine. Wings are being spread to provide shelter, food and transport. Strangers are welcomed into homes, shared meal tables becoming altars, arguably more valid than the one we gather round this morning: they are emulating Jesus. By singing his song: 'Peace will come, and let it begin with me' we are at least showing the right intent. Our voices are no vision but that little bit of God that resides in each of us, wishing to wipe away all tears. This is Christianity without Religion.

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