



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Second Sunday of Lent 2022 Year C

Philippians 3.17-4.1

Luke 13.31-35

Last week we saw Jesus on the cusp of his ministry facing the temptation in the wilderness. Now we see him turning his face to his final journey to Jerusalem and so nearing its fulfilment. What the reading last week showed most clearly was the triumph of goodness over evil, Jesus treading down the powers of darkness and championing all that is good in his Father's name. What we hold to in our faith is that whatever happens, whatever we are called on to face, ultimately goodness and love will prevail.

Throughout this time we continue to pray for the people of Ukraine. On Ash Wednesday the world focussed its prayers on that situation. All over the world prayers are joined together for them. The psalm set for today is psalm 27, 'The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom then shall I fear?...Though an army should encamp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid, and though war should rise up against me, yet I will put my trust in you.' is very appropriate. Ultimately goodness will always triumph over evil. God is sovereign over all creation.

Jesus is living in a country occupied by a foreign power and under a brutal military regime. He will taste the worst that human evil can do. God has broken into the world, Jesus has come to fulfil the promises of God foretold by the prophets and yet the majority of Jews cannot see it. They are blind to God's word. What this passage contains is a lament and a warning. A warning that the holy city will soon be under siege by the Romans, that all will be desolate and the house of God, the temple will be destroyed.

The first striking thing is the words of a group of Pharisees. Normally they are painted in a very negative light but there is nothing here to suggest that. They issue a warning to Jesus,

³¹ 'At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, 'Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.'

We have seen his murder of John the Baptist and Jesus poses more of a threat. Herod's hold on the throne was not legitimate. He is not of Israel's true line. He is a puppet King manipulated by the Romans yet strong enough to impose his will by force, a cruel bully. Little changes!

Jesus is gaining support in that crowds follow him to hear his teaching. Jesus is the Messiah; he is of David's line, the one destined to rule Israel and ultimately the world. If the people were to accept this Herod would be seen for what he truly is. We saw with what brutality Herod the Great acted when brought the news by the magi that a king was born in Bethlehem, he ordered the slaughter of the innocents. There is no reason to believe there is any less danger from his son. Jesus however shows utter contempt for Herod.

³² 'He said to them, 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'

The word fox represents cunning and the predatory nature of Herod. Of course it links to the metaphor of the hen we see later. Not only does Jesus ignore the threat from Herod he tells him of his great work, his mission, specifically his defeat of the forces of evil. This describes Jesus' ministry but it also holds echoes of his final triumph, the resurrection on the 'third day'. No one reading this could fail to recognise the reference.

Quite apart from that Jesus expresses his destiny. It will not be at Herod's hands that he will die. Jesus is the last and greatest of the prophets. He is the last in a long line of those who have been persecuted and ultimately killed because they brought the word of God to the people, because they sought to change their hearts and minds. Jesus is so much more, he is the Messiah foretold by the prophets. Jesus brings God's final covenant.

³³ 'Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.'" ³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!

Last week we looked back to the Old Testament, to Deuteronomy and Moses telling the Israelites to turn to God or that they would suffer the consequences. This 'stiff-necked people' rebelled during the wilderness years and have done so again and again, says Jesus, turning their back on God's chosen representatives. This is clearly illustrated in Jesus' parable of the vineyard. How again and again the owner sent his representatives only to have them killed so finally he sent his son who was murdered too.

What follows now is a lament for the holy city,

³⁴ 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!'

In AD 70 the Romans will put down rebellion and destroy the temple, the desolation will be complete. People have followed human values and not God's, that will lead to destruction. Jesus offers a very different way. He brings the way of God; he offers the good news of the kingdom values to the people. He alone can save them but they will turn their backs on him. The shouts of

'Hosanna' will turn to 'Crucify him.' The metaphor of the hen is very powerful. A hen will, if the life of its brood is in danger, cover them with its wings to protect them. It will, if fire threatens, risk the destruction of itself to save the little ones.

Jesus is the saviour and only through him can the people be saved. Sadly most turn their backs on him and the offered salvation. But Jesus' words come true at his crucifixion. He dies to save humanity, he bears the sin of the world, he struggles against pain and evil and he overcomes the worst humanity can do to him. He triumphs at Calvary; If we want a symbol of the ultimate triumph of goodness over evil just look at the cross. At the resurrection all are set free from death and Jesus wins eternal life for all who turn to him.

³⁵ 'And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." '

Jesus' call to all of them is urgent, there is not much time; turn to God's saving ways and kingdom values. They need to turn to Jesus as anointed Messiah. Sadly so few will do so in his lifetime, Jesus will walk the way of pain and death but he will triumph at his resurrection.

No earthly power motivated by evil can succeed in the long run. Goodness will triumph because God is all goodness.

The reading from Paul's epistle to the Philippians, it is one of his 'prison' letters written while Paul is in captivity. From our gospel reading we have moved on only about twenty five years and the Jesus movement is growing rapidly. Paul and his fellow missionaries have established new Christian communities all over Greece and despite persecution the followers of the way are growing rapidly.

It is important to understand some of the background to Philippi. It is famous because after the assassination of Julius Caesar a huge battle was fought in BC 42 between Mark Anthony and Octavian and Brutus and Cassius. Octavian was to become Caesar Augustus. What happened was that a Roman colony was established in the area of Philippi. In time other veterans joined the colony and it became just that, a place which sought to model itself on Rome. The cult of Emperor Worship was established and Caesar was seen as Lord and saviour, as a god. Now then we can see that this sentence,

²⁰ 'But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.'

is central. That 'but' is a huge one. These Philippian Christians were to be set apart, they are citizens of heaven. That does not mean they are waiting to die to be transported to some better and spiritual place; that is not it at all. The Roman colonists, many descended from those original veterans, would be Roman citizens or feel like it. That did not mean they lived in Rome but if you like, brought Roman culture, ways and life to this outpost. They upheld all that was Roman, they worshipped Roman gods including Caesar and their allegiance was to Cesar. So now, what Paul is saying is you have accepted Jesus Christ, you have chosen Christianity therefore you are citizens of heaven here. That is, you must live by the 'kingdom values' your allegiance is to Jesus Christ, he and he alone is Lord.

They are living in an alien culture with very different values.

¹⁷ 'Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.'

As Christians they accept not only Jesus as God and Saviour but they must walk with him in their lives and follow his teaching. This is so often opposed to what is rife around them. They have the great example of Christ himself but also of course Paul and his followers and they must throw off the old behaviour and behave as true followers of Jesus and that will mean a change of heart, mind-set and attitude. The people whom they live amongst will seek to destroy them. They are enemies of Rome because no true Christian will recognise anyone but Jesus as Lord. We know that to say Jesus is Lord is to proclaim his divine sovereignty. Whatever happens, Paul says, they must stay true to the teaching of Christ. For those who seek the earthly gratification and selfish ways there will be only one result,

¹⁹ 'Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.'

What he is not saying is that natural things are no good. God gave us bodies and we use them according to Christ's teaching, this central one being, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' We have great hope because Christ has won salvation for us, because Jesus at his resurrection overcame death,

²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

Jesus' body was transformed at his resurrection and death could touch him no more. We will share in this; in that, in God's time our bodies will be transformed as his has been and we will know eternal life with God. Jesus will come at the renewed creation and will rule God's perfected earth. Therefore says Paul to the Philippian Christians, hold fast to the faith you have learned from me,

^{4.1}Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.'

You will receive God's promised reward and strive to live the kingdom values on earth. It is with great warmth and love that Paul speaks to them.

Jesus in our gospel reading turns his face to his destiny in Jerusalem, there to win the promises Paul speaks of here. God is once again calling his people into a relationship with him, as Delia Smith puts it, 'into a relationship that promises renewal, healing, a fullness of life, in fact a share in the life of God himself.' Our series of Lent readings take us nearer the cross, the cross which is Jesus' throne and the mark of his triumph over evil.

There is only one Lord, and that is Jesus. This is our faith. We know that as surely as Easter Day follows Good Friday, goodness will always triumph over evil. He is always with us and loves us more than we can ever know.

'Life with its way before us lies; Christ is the path and Christ the prize.' John Samuel Bewley Monsell

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