

Palm Sunday Evensong

I have faith in the night - In the name of the Living God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm currently reading Tim Collins' biography *The Rules of Engagement* - a fascinating analysis of counter-insurgency warfare in Ireland and across the globe. Before becoming the Commanding Officer of the 1st Royal Irish Regiment and the head of the SAS, Collins grew up with the 'Troubles' in Ireland and has a fascinating perspective on the value of 'hearts and minds' versus 'shock and awe' and of the danger of going down the road of 'us' and 'them'. In it there's a moving account of working through the night as his father is dying, searching out some hidden weapons of some break away members of the IRA, and the battling rains coming down deep into the night. It was, if you know your Irish Viticulture, not far from a Irish vineyard (no need for any jokes about that being a pseudonym for a Guinness Factory!).

Our first lesson tonight from Isaiah is a love song, which quickly develops into an allegory where God is the owner of the vineyard, which represents God's people. The coming destruction (vv5-6) results from the people's failure to do what God hoped for. The good, fruitful harvest that God "expected" or "hoped for" is named with the two extraordinarily important words "justice" and "righteousness." The structure and rhetoric of the passage add even further emphasis to these two crucial words. They occur in the climactic verse, and the alliterative word-play in Hebrew highlights them even further. Instead of the "justice" (*mishpat*) that God "expected," God sees "bloodshed" (*mispach*). And instead of "righteousness" (*tsedaqah*), God hears "a cry" (*tse'aqah*). Instead of the goodness that God expects the people to enact and embody, there is violence that leads the victims to cry out for help.

The Hebrew word translated "cry" is particularly important and revealing. When God's people were being victimized by Pharaoh in Egypt, their response was to cry to God for help (we see this in Exodus 3:7). This word also occurs in 1 Samuel 8:18 in the culmination of

Samuel's warning to the people about the "justice" (see NRSV "ways" in 1 Samuel 8:9, 11) of the soon-to-be-established monarchy. As Samuel puts it, the "justice" of the kings will be nothing but oppression. The people "will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves." In short, the warning is that the monarchy itself will re-create the oppressive conditions of Pharaoh's Egypt. Isaiah 5:7 suggests that the worst has happened. God's own people have chosen a system that creates victims and evokes their cries for help.

The details of the oppressive conditions are evident as chapter 5 unfolds -- joining "house to house" and adding "field to field" (verse 8), thus displacing poor farmers from their land (and only source of livelihood), and resulting in both homelessness and hunger (verse 13). Excess, greed, and conspicuous consumption are apparently supported by corruption and manipulation of the legal system (verse 23).

And so at the beginning of this most Holy Week we are challenged to consider where we sit in our lives with ‘justice’ and ‘righteousness’, with bloodshed and cries for vengeance. How do we propagate a system that creates victims and evokes their cries for help. And how do we break out beyond these systems and find a path of forgiveness in our lives that breaks down the structures of pain and revenge, of oppression, bloodshed and revenge?

Some of you may have heard of one of my great heroes the French Trappist Monk Fr Christian de Ch  r  ge - the film *Of Gods and Men* is based on the story of his fellow monks. Christian was a man of forgiveness, as his last testament bears witness. It was opened and read on the feast of Pentecost, shortly after the monks were killed. In it he writes,

'If it should happen one day - and it could be today- that I become a victim of the terrorism, which now seems ready to encompass all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country. I ask them to accept that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure...'.

I could not desire such a death. It seems to me to be important to state

this. I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if this people I love were to be accused of my murder. It would be to pay too dearly for what will, perhaps, be called ‘the grace of martyrdom’, to owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be, especially if he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam.... And you also, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, for you also I wish this ‘thank you’ and adieu - to commend you to the God whose face I see in yours. And may we find each other, happy ‘good thieves’ in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen.’

This week reminds us of the passing of day and night - spoken of so powerfully by the poet David Whyte, who speaks of this time in the evening as being '*A time of truce, armistice, for the self and for others, a moment for compassionate humour, taking a breath, asking if it might be possible for so and so to happen later on, not now. A prelude for the deeper appraisal and self-forgiveness demanded by the final entry into night.*' For us who profess the Christian faith, the time before sleep is seen as a rehearsal for our final entry toward ultimate transformation of death. For 'night and sleep is the time of summation and integration, when we work unconsciously to thread together a bedrock of identity.'

This week we confront faith in the night. Faith that death is not the end. Faith that life has meaning. Faith that the one crucified on the Cross, has a relevance to our lives beyond our wildest dreams. And that the divine owner of the vineyard who sent his son to, will gather together the broken pieces of the world together.

Yes, faith invites us to avoid the kind of self-deceit that Jesus attacks whereby people assume that 'we' are on the right side with God and the 'others' are not. For everything we earn and achieve will get us nowhere, as we meet God face to face, and all we will have to trust in is the reality of God, wearing the face of Jesus, and waiting to wash our feet. That is the way of servanthood and costly grace which welcomes good thieves and travels through the Cross. As the theologian Kosuke Koyama observed, 'Jesus Christ is not a quick answer. If Jesus Christ is the answer, he is the answer in the way portrayed in crucifixion.'

Sunday, 14 April 2019

Our readings tonight reveal something of the importance of the tending of vineyards and how we operate the stuff of our daily lives. They remind us that God expects Justice and Righteousness - and our readings remind us that we need to become better stewards of the fragile planet earth we inhabit, and how we are to see the face of God in those who differ from ourselves, even in the night of suffering, as we work together for the breaking in of the Kingdom. For the Church as a whole perpetuates the life of Christ who ‘binds all together in one divine and human life’ (Gore) - and this is profoundly so for us as a part of the Christian Community entering this most Holy Week.

To have faith in the night means to have a secret loyalty to things other than those that are so slavishly celebrated by others in the day. It is an invitation to dance to the God who offers to show us, in the words of Isaiah (the author of our first lesson), ‘the treasures of darkness.’

As the Bohemian-Austrian poet Rilke’s Poem *You Darkness* puts it,

*You darkness, from which I come,
I love you more than all the fires
that fence out the world,
for the fire makes a circle
for everyone
so that no one sees you any more.*

*But darkness holds it all:
the shape and the flame,
the animal and myself;
how it holds them,
all powers, all sight -*

*and it is possible: its great strength
is breaking into my body.*

I have faith in the night.

Rainer Maria Rilke

May you have faith in the night this great week and may the Easter fire pierce the night and reveal ‘the power of God for salvation’ through the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus. Amen.