

2nd Sunday in Lent; Luke 13:31-end, Philippians 3:17-4.1, Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

On the front of our Gospel book, as in many stain glass windows, each Gospel writer is attributed with a symbol. Matthew's emblem is a winged man, because his Gospel begins with a human genealogy, focusing on Christ the Man. The emblem of Mark is a lion because his Gospel begins with a roar, John the Baptist, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness." John's emblem is an eagle, the bird that flies higher than any other and can stare directly at the sun, because John offers us a bird's eyes view, a theological account of Jesus' life. The emblem of Luke however is a calf or an ox, an animal associated with sacrifice (just as we heard in the Genesis account). This symbolism for Luke links to the sacrifices offered in the Temple; Luke's Gospel both begins and finishes in the Temple in Jerusalem. Luke emphasises more than any other Gospel, the sacrifice of Jesus made for the whole world.

Although Luke begins and ends in the Temple, he is writing mainly for the Gentiles, those outside the Jewish tradition. Luke never uses the Jewish term Rabbi, for instance, but always a Greek term meaning Master. And in his genealogy, he traces Jesus not to Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race, but to Adam, the first of the human race. Luke was making it clear that Jesus, though from Jewish roots, was the Saviour, not just of the Jewish people, but of the whole world!

Luke stresses more than any other account that Jesus breaks down all barriers (think of the parables of the Lost coin, lost sheep, lost Son, all unique to Luke's account). Jew or Gentile, sinner or saint, Luke wants us to know that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was made for all.

With this in mind, we see the significance of our Gospel passage. Jesus is talking to a Jewish crowd, and with pained expression, asking why Jerusalem, the home of the Temple, the Holy Land, where God is supposedly most tangibly present, rejects and kills those sent from God. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Now, this could be alluding to a previous visit to Jerusalem during his ministry, but I think Jesus might also be hinting at his Trinitarian relationship to the Father. Namely, Jesus is speaking of the history of God with his people Israel. The sweep of the Old Testament tells a story of God's love for his people and the varied response to that love. But most often, God's love for his people is misheard, misunderstood, or just plain rejected. Yet their skewed response is always located within the horizon of God's continual and steadfast mercy.

We see this story of God's love offered, rejected, and met again with undefeatable mercy reach its climax at the cross. Because the cross seen in the light of the resurrection, is God's definitive and lasting refusal of our rejection of him.

As we discussed at the Lent course last Monday night, and as Luke urges us, we come to see the story of Israel, though specific and a particular history, as our story. This is a story in which we are included. Our failure, our rejection of God, but so too our redemption and our salvation.

And so, Jesus' specific words, about this specific city and place, holds relevance for us today too.

Here we are warned about power and control. Jerusalem, the home of religion, where access to God was controlled and managed. In this passage, Jesus alludes to his entry into Jerusalem, which we celebrate as Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, when he says; "you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." The movement of Holy Week, however, is one that inverts attempts to restrict access to God or determine spiritual insiders and outsiders.

Holy Week begins with Jesus turning the tables in the Temple, challenging a system that only permitted access to God through bartering and sacrificial offerings. By the end of the week, we learn that God's presence is not locked in this Temple of religiosity, but is outside the city walls, in Jesus' broken and defenceless body, dying on rubbish dump, by a public road side. Not our sacrifice, but God's sacrificial offering of himself, accessible to all.

This is good news for everyone. But we do not always hear it as good news. This is not good news for Herod, a beneficiary of this system of power and control. It is not good news for those in Jerusalem, who considered themselves as spiritual insiders. Like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal Son, God's mercy is not good news if we ~~consider ourselves "spiritual insiders"~~ and want to set limits on who God's merciful love is for. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, the church boundaries are drawn afresh every time the Gospel is proclaimed. To presume ourselves closer to God than others betrays our actual distance from God.

The Philippians passage also reminds us, the resurrection is accepted most joyfully by those who are less invested in the “success” of this world.¹ Of course, Christian life is not about escapism from this world, that God creates and loves.² But neither can we deny the comfort of the Gospel for those who do not feel fully at home in this world; those who suffer, those who feel rejected and unloved. Precisely because our citizenship is not here, but in the world to come.

One of my favourite songs is by U2, Where the Streets Have No Name. I love the significance of the lyrics; “The city's a flood
And our love turns to rust
We're beaten and blown by the wind
Trampled in dust
I'll show you a place
High on the desert plain,
Where the streets have no name”

“Where the streets have no name” alludes to the forgotten parts of our world. And our thoughts are never too far from Ukraine at the moment, neither under Russian sovereignty, nor definitively a member of the Western power bloc. Enough of an outsider on both counts for war to pervade. Like many other places of war in our world.

But the lyric, “where the streets have no name,” beyond the cities of power and influence, also points us to God’s heavenly kingdom, where all tribalism, all territorial status, is irrelevant before God. There is then a close connection between the outsiders of this world and the Kingdom of God.

So, in this passage, Luke invites us to examine the ways our faith has become a static presumption of insider status, so that we are deaf to what God is saying and doing now, in unexpected places? The ways in which, like Jerusalem, we do not allow ourselves to be gathered in by God’s love.

¹ “Many live as enemies of the cross, whose minds are set on earthly things... but our citizenship is in heaven and it is from there that we are expecting a saviour.”

² Rather, it is because we believe in eternal life that our life now has eternal significance!

And speaking as a clergy person, I can assure you how scarily easy it is to fall into this mindset of static faith; to have your whole life orientated around serving God and the church, yet to miss the *Living God* in the midst of it all.

Though, even here, at the end of Luke's gospel we see that Jerusalem is gathered in as part of God's plan of salvation for the world, as Jesus sends out his disciples to "proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem." Luke writes, "they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the Temple blessing God."

So, this Lent may we hear both the comfort and challenge of the Gospel. The comfort for those who see themselves as outsiders or unworthy of God's love, and the challenge when we find ourselves thinking we are more worthy of this love than others.

Amen.