

Finding Eden once again

Palm Sunday 2019

Psalm 118

Luke 19:28-40

Marches, marches everywhere but not a solution in sight. It's enough to make stones cry. (Luke 19:40)

Police helicopters have been busy over Leave and Remain demos in London revealing nervousness about trouble kicking off.

Supporters of the opposition leader in Israel shouted "BB, King of Israel" when they thought they had enough seats to form a government after this week's election. It's a very highly charged phrase, echoing back to King David, which reveals their expectation and hope, but also accentuates their disappointment as Netanyahu probably keeps hold of power.

Demonstrations in Sudan and Algeria have briefly made the news, and demonstrators there facing water cannons put themselves at greater risk than those in London where, at least, the illegal water cannons Boris Johnson ordered were disposed of by his successor.

The march of General Haftar's Militia on Tripoli is perhaps more worrying and complex. The UN backs the government, but Haftar has a track record of fighting extremism. How the UN decides who to back isn't all together clear. What tipped the balance in favour of the opposition leader in Venezuela, for instance? That's not to do the UN down. It's an impossible call. It's hard to know where to put your trust.

This febrile atmosphere is deeply unsettling and, perhaps, should open us to the crackling tension and heightened danger in Jerusalem as Jesus approached. Our current crises should make us at least sympathetic to the religious authorities, admiring of the disciples' courage and understanding of how crowds can turn. It can make us more alert to the very deliberate signals Jesus was sending then and now.

It can also make us ask what we think worth demonstrating about and what would command our loyalty enough to devote our whole self and our resources to it.

Bethany is a place of safety and friendship. It's where Mary and Martha live and where Lazarus was raised (John) and where Jesus was anointed (Matthew and John). Mark says during Holy Week he returned to Bethany in the evenings. It's the place where Jesus will take his disciples to say goodbye (Luke 24:50). He sets out from the place of safety and friendship and heads toward Jerusalem, a place of glamour, busyness, high politics and danger.

That Luke and other Gospel authors give us the odd details about arrangements for transport *twice* shows we are meant to notice their effort. It underlines the sense of purpose and momentum in Jesus' heart; the sense of rightness in this stylised procession. The "multitude" of disciples behave impulsively, but Jesus does not. He is very deliberate. If I were crafting an image-making publicity stunt involving a young horse, I think I would insist it had already been broken in. Luke says, specifically, this one has not. Again, we're meant to notice. The un-used, un-sullied

animals evoke the transport of the Ark of the Covenant, borne by oxen which have never before been harnessed. (1 Samuel 6:7). The ark of the Covenant has Cherubim at the corners which, according to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, only appear there and at the gates of Eden (Genesis 3:24). ([The great partnership](#) p173) The wisdom of God is borne into Jerusalem, the Law is fulfilled in him, there is nothing more precious, nothing to be held with more honour and reverence. Here is the solution to all our political conflict, neighbourly disputes and struggle over resources. This truth is borne not by the warhorse stallion of a general, but the colt of a King coming in peace. Knowing him, we could know Eden's peace once again. But the busy, glamorous city where religion and empire meet will reject him.

St Luke doesn't mention palms, because he wants us to notice the cloaks as emblems of identity and resource, put extravagantly at Jesus' disposal, dramatizing their sense of obedience and devotion to him. On this demo, all they are and own is dramatically put at his feet. I have to admit, my own Christian commitment seems rather shabby in the light of this procession. I'll admit Christianity is my cloak, an identity I own and am glad of, but I have risked little for my faith. It's also interesting to imagine placards about our most pressing political causes mingled with Jesus' procession, seeing how dull some of them can look in his light; how their resentments are highlighted by his grace, and how our aggressive campaigning is judged by his peaceable journey. His journey was for the sake of others, so he surely affirms demonstrators who today put themselves at risk to campaign for others' well-being. He heads towards Jerusalem's danger, and surely affirms those for whom a demonstration is a profound risk. Carrying this (LGBT+) banner in Bahrain or Russia would put you in mortal danger. (I have decided not to stay at the Dorchester any more.)

It's worth noting, though, most of our demonstrations are issue-focussed, but Jesus is displaying a character, a way of living and a way of holding power that subverts our competitive thinking. This is important to help us keep questioning an issue-based faith. I had a conversation with a wonderful, gracious colleague who voted differently to me in the referendum. Of course I think I voted according to the deepest stirrings of Christian virtue, but that conversation challenged me not to turn that conviction into exclusivist prejudice. I needed that conversation to be reminded it is our devotion to the person of Christ, not the side we took on that issue, that matters. It is in his person, not in a list of ideas, that Eden-peace is rediscovered. It's less the issue on the banner than the virtue of the person carrying it - love, joy, peace, patience, humility, gentleness, generosity - that will change the world.

With peaceful authority he comes, but to this world it is a provocative peace. When, nervous as a London police helicopter, the authorities tell him to quieten his followers, Jesus quotes the Habakkuk line about the stones of Jerusalem crying out. They know the scripture. The stones cry out in protest because they were building "a town by bloodshed and found[ing] a city on iniquity," the wealthy protecting themselves with "evil gain[s]". As we blame Europe or Islam or immigrants, for all sorts of woes, what might the stones of Britain's grand government buildings cry out? While Leave and Remain demos and spokespeople get all the attention at the moment, and the noisy static of Brexit fills the air, for three years we've give little air time to the impact of youth service cuts on knife crime. We are not attending to the taxation needed for dementia and social care to be properly integrated with health services. We are seeing little debate about transport and in work poverty in this country. Only the briefest attention has given to the profound environmental concerns of the young, like the Swedish teenager telling the climate change summit "I want you to panic."

We are bound to demonstrate about different things. It is understandable that we have diverse opinions and passions. I have never been on a demo. Maybe I'm too much of a coward, too lazy, or afraid of distancing myself from other people. (Mind you, I might be stirred to radical political protest if the price of white burgundy goes up much more.) It's striking how Psalm 118, using by

Passover pilgrims, calls people to devote themselves in praise to God who frees the enslaved, the bullied and who alone can make us feel safe.

First "Israel" is called, Israel meaning "struggles with God."

Then "house of Aaron," the priestly, caste, evoking all the formally religious people.

Then "those who fear YHWH," those in awe of God in a more visceral, pre-religious, instinctive way. All are called. All are included.

I wonder which you feel nearest to: those wrestling with the very idea of God; those finding the rhythm and discipline of Christian prayer at least enough to hold on and navigate by; those with more instinctive stirring, not sold on the whole religious institution, but feeling, like the wonderful friend who's had enough of a patriarchal church and calls herself a feral Christian. All are called.

Peaceable, purposeful and provocative, Jesus points back to the Law already given, whose character we have failed to assimilate. He points forwards to a new kingdom where law is not needed because his grace prevails. Leaving safe, friendly company, he heads towards our dysfunction, dramatically exposing the complex reality of the present, asking us what we would risk everything for, while making us see the ambiguities in any apparently black and white issue. In him grace envelops complexity, so that we might find our way back to a safe tender place with God once more.

American artist Judy Chicago is a woman of extraordinary vision and political imagination. As we may imagine this week Jesus leaving the dinner-party warmth of Mary and Martha's Bethany home, you may like to see her exhibition The Dinner Party <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yMtdWxAc60>. Chicago has written a poem imagining a place where grace reigns:

"Eden once again"

And then all that has divided us will merge.

And then compassion will be wedded to power.

And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind.

And then both men and women will be gentle.

And then no person will be subject to another's will.

And then all will be rich and free and varied.

And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many.

And then all will share equally in the earth's abundance.

And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old.

And then all will nourish the young.

And then all will cherish life's creatures.

And then all will live in harmony with each other and the earth.

And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.