

SERMON 18 MARCH LENT 5

As we go through the Church's year, week by week; as we mark the special times like Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week and Easter, there is, for many of us, a familiarity. We know the stories. We anticipate the stories' endings before we get there. It's inevitable. That is not to say that we don't receive new insights along the way. If that were not so, our faith journey would be dry indeed. Fortunately, Scripture always has the power to surprise us with the unexpected. This is just the same for me as the one who is entrusted with standing here and talking to you each week as it is for any of you. I find that often the surprise happens when I have been holding other thoughts alongside the Scriptures. There is a danger in that if a sermon, indeed the theme of our worship, reflects more of a personal agenda than our collective concerns about faith and discipleship, but I hold to the quote from the great theologian Karl Barth that I mentioned a few weeks ago, that the preacher should always have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

So here I am today. I have the Bible beneath, literally and metaphorically, and this in the other hand. (*Newspaper*) First, John's gospel. I read today's passage many times over this week. At first it seemed to hold different strands which seemed not to fit. There is the little episode about the Greeks going up to the festival, so they could worship. It is often assumed that John puts this reference there as an indication that Jesus' message, indeed his life, was not just offered to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. While we may know that to be true, John was writing at a time when the gospel had been spreading to Gentile communities for some decades. These Greeks seem more likely to have been Greek speaking Jews. At any rate, they want to see Jesus. We are not told why, but maybe it was because Jesus has come straight from Bethany, from his friends Martha and Mary where, witnessed by a large crowd, he has raised Lazarus from the dead. Imagine witnessing this! Had these Greeks been there, looking on? If they had, it is no wonder they wanted to see more of Jesus and to speak to him. He had demonstrated a power of life over death. Who was this man Jesus people asked? He had then come into Jerusalem to a huge welcome as the crowds shouted their "Hosannas". (Yes, John places today's passage after Palm Sunday). It's not surprising if those who had come from some

distance wanted to see more of this man for themselves. We will never know if they did, but, once again, we have Philip and Andrew bringing these seekers to Jesus.

After this section there is a change of story-line. John uses this as an opportunity for Jesus to talk about his imminent death. However powerful the raising of Lazarus may have been for people, we hear John's version of Jesus inner wrestling and agony that the other gospels place at Gethsemane: "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father save me from this hour?' No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify my name!" This is a very public agonising as he speaks in front of the crowd, and there is a very public response as a voice from heaven is heard by all: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." Jesus states "Now is the time for judgement on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from earth, will draw all people to myself." He would be lifted up on the cross of shame, which would become a powerful symbol for millions of people. He had evidently reached the point of no return, certainly in his own determination.

This is a familiar story for us, isn't it, even if John's gospel frames it a bit differently? We know that Jesus talked about his death and that his disciples found it hard. We too are usually not comfortable with such talk of death and dying. We know we all confront mortality, yet, for many, it is too hard a subject. We may be fearful of what it might mean for us personally, and, quite probably, what it also means in relation to those we love. It casts a shadow because it is about loss and the inevitable change that brings. Just after the verses we heard, Jesus talks to his friends about walking in the light which they would have for only a little longer. He told them to believe in the light so that they could become children of the light. When someone we love knows they have not much time left and sets out to make the most of that, it becomes a time infused with intensity that has a sharp poignancy between joy and grief. The light and the darkness. Such times live in the memory. Jesus is telling his friends that this is what it will be like for them. He knows they will need to grasp the light strongly on the future. Like them, we can take hold of the light that the darkness has never been able to extinguish. John is telling us is what happened in Jerusalem,

near the end, in that precious time before the last Passover meal, but it is a timeless message about light and darkness. Jesus speaks to his disciples and then, we are told, he went and hid himself from them.

This is what the words of Scripture tell us. Hearing these words is one thing, coming to understand them is helpful, but what do we make of them for our lives, for the world? Sometimes, I think, we have to zoom out a bit and take a look at the bigger picture. There is always an overarching question about what God is doing, and, at this time of year especially, what Jesus' commitment to walking on to Jerusalem, into known suffering, means for us. I don't want to get to Easter too soon, but I want to reflect with you about what we know about Jesus and what God's intention was through him, because we are poised, as it were, on the brink. The words in John's gospel where Jesus agonises over what will happen indicate that Jesus understood there was a purpose to this and that it was not just about an inevitable result of conflict with the authorities. "It was for this reason I came to this hour" he says.

Last week we focussed on God's gifts of love and grace through Jesus and the Spirit. We thought about the statement that God sent Jesus into the world not to condemn it but to save, to heal it. How does God do this in Jesus? How do the terrible choices Jesus faced mean something for us? Jesus, as John tells us, is making big statements about the power of God over deathliness and the struggle of light against darkness. Jesus' own agonising led to his refusal to respond to the destructiveness and violence of the world with violence. He had faced his demons and would meet all the anger and negativity with love and forgiveness. Easy words to say but so very hard to put into practice, as Jesus struggle shows.

This is the all so human story we all deal with – how we choose ways and responses that are rooted in life-giving peace in our daily lives. I have to tell you I have an alter-ego. When I am driving and am stuck behind someone going at 45 in a 60 zone, or someone who slows down almost to 20kph to go around a bend, my internal reactions are hardly full of grace and peace. I have been saying to myself "Mary, that is not what non-violence is about"! I don't tail-gate or honk the horn, I just make rude comments to myself. A seemingly trivial matter, but it illustrates the gap

in our daily lives between our customary ways and God's ways of grace and peace, of non-violence. We can't say we want to walk a path of peace if we don't live it, day by day. How hard it is to learn not to meet anger with anger; not to trade insults or be drawn into behaviours that demean! And let's not go near Twitter.

We live in a world where the mega-narratives seem to be written by powers that tell a story of matching force with force, where the paths that should bring life and peace are filled with the rubble of conflict and destruction. Look at Russia, at North Korea, at USA, at Syria, no name but a few. At another level, so much of what we see around us is about the same stories of violence, be it institutional, domestic, social or economic. It's there, in front of us, all the time. One of the most urgent and critical abuses of power is our treatment of planet earth and our disregard for the affect that we have on it. All this narrative can make us feel that we have no voice, no control at all. But there is the counter-narrative that is held within the Church, indeed within all religions, that points to a different way. Our beliefs tell us that the all life is sacred and that means the whole planet. All creation bears God's love and we are asked to tend it all, not to misuse it. This has become critical for the earth and yet mostly we go on as if we can still do what we want. Sometimes that disregard is born of ignorance. More often these days it is born of fear because the consequences of looking seriously at what is happening to the earth are so enormous we don't know how to respond. It is caught up in the same master-narrative of power that grows in darkness.

We do not have just one master narrative that tells of power struggles that devalue life. Jesus focusses us on another way and offers a different, apparently foolish wisdom. We are not politicians, economists, scientists, bankers, miners, or whatever. We bear the name of Christ, whoever we are, and his way was one of meeting violence with non-violence, a way of life-affirming peace. Thinking back to where we began, the Greeks asked to see Jesus, the one who was able to unwrap life that had been held by the cords of death and through whom God would show the power of love over death and evil. God would do so much more through him too. That is a story worth seeking, as story to live by. It is a wisdom we need.