

Sermon

Sunday 5 April 2020

Lesson

St Matthew 21: 1 – 11

One of the living saints of our day is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Tutu once said, ‘Those who say that politics and religion should not mix do not read the same Bible as I do.’ Speaking of apartheid, Tutu said that black people were often perplexed that many of those who treated them so abominably were not heathen but ‘claimed to be fellow Christians who read the same Bible’ as they did. Tutu said:

The Bible they and we both read is quite categorical – what endows human beings, every single human being without exception, with infinite worth is not this or that biological or any other external attribute. No, it is the fact that each one of us has been created in the image of God. This is something intrinsic. It comes as it were with the package. It means that each one of us is a God-carrier, God’s viceroy, God’s representative. This is why treating anybody as if they were less than this is veritably blasphemous. It is like spitting in the face of God.....The Bible turned out to be the most

subversive book imaginable in a situation of injustice and oppression.

Speaking in Edinburgh in 2009, Tutu repeated that claim. To the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, he said:

Thus says the LORD, ‘We are family. I, if I be lifted up, will draw not some, will draw all, incredibly, revolutionary, radical, radical, radical assertion, draw all, all into one embrace and not let us go. In this family, there are no outsiders; all are insiders: rich, poor, lame, blind, clever, not so clever, white, black, red, yellow, Palestinian, Israeli, Al Qaeda, Bin Laden, George Bush, all in this embrace, all, all, all, all, all, all...lesbian, gay, so-called straight, all. We are family. We are sisters and brothers.

It is because we are made in the image of God, creatures capable of the most immense love and compassion, of wonder and comprehension, that religion has a claim on the world of politics, power and justice.

During the Second World War, many German Christians, together with others, fought in different ways against Nazism.

“One of Hitler’s most trusted intelligence officers, Colonel Alexis Baron von Roenne, his Christian conscience outraged by Nazi brutality, falsified the battle order on the Western Front on the eve of D-Day. He went to his execution declaring, ‘I shall be going home to our Lord in complete calm and in the certainty of salvation.’”

Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg translated his faith into direct action against Hitler. Stauffenberg was the author of the plot to assassinate Hitler in July 1944.

A third German Christian, Helmut von Moltke, was an officer in German military intelligence. He spread the word about the appalling atrocities carried out by the Nazis; he loudly and

publicly insisted that Germany abide by the Geneva Convention and, in light of the mass murders, he asked of the German soldiers who had taken part: ‘How can anyone know these things and still walk around free?’ Moltke was arrested by the Gestapo and, after a year in prison, was hanged.

Moltke had spent much of his time in prison in philosophical contemplation. He believed that the moral and intellectual rebellion against Hitler was the greatest threat. He wrote, ‘What the Third Reich is so terrified of is ultimately a private individual who has discussed the practical, ethical demands of Christianity...’ In South Africa, under apartheid, we had, on the one side, the might of the White South African government and, on the other, Archbishop Tutu quoting from the Bible, that subversive book. In Germany, under Nazism, we had, on one side, the grotesque might and ideology of

Hitler and, on the other, many Christians in response to their faith living out an altogether different set of values.

Palm Sunday is about the mix of politics and religion. Two thousand years ago Jesus rode into Jerusalem on colt that had never been ridden. The disciples brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it. Jesus sat on the colt. Many people spread their cloaks on the road while others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt and he makes his way to the temple. Once there, he drives out those who bought and sold in the temple, overturning tables and scattering the seats of those who sold doves. Jesus said, 'Is it not written, 'My

house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations?’ but you have made it a den of thieves.’

Jesus entered the city from the east, from the countryside.

Jesus had organised the timing and every detail of His entry

into the holy city. It was a dramatic, prophetic and

confrontational gesture. There were not one but two

processions entering Jerusalem on that day. Jesus had

pre-arranged to have a colt ready and sent his disciples to

collect it. Jesus entered the city from Galilee. He was

accompanied by his disciples and many followers, by country

folk, by peasants. On the opposite side of the city, from the

west, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, entered Jerusalem

at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. One

commentator writes:

Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust.

Pontius Pilate represented the Emperor. He had come to Jerusalem at the time of Passover to reinforce the garrison there. Too many people gathered for the Passover for Rome not to take precautionary measures. Since the days of Augustus, the Emperor was believed to be divine: he was said to be 'the son of God, the Lord and Saviour'. He brought peace on earth. Augustus had been fathered by the god Apollo and, on death, he ascended into heaven to take his permanent seat among the gods. The day on which the Roman Governor processed from the west into Jerusalem displaying the might and theology of Rome Jesus rode into

Jerusalem from the east on a colt. Jesus entered the city as the son of David, as *Yahweh's* Messiah: here the justice of God's Kingdom was on display.

This is religion and politics together. The Palm Sunday procession is not for the amusement of children. It is direct political action rising from the deeply held religious view that every human being is made in the image of God and that neither the High Priest nor Pontius Pilate has the right to dehumanise a single child of God. God did not reside with the Emperor; every human being, every peasant, every king, every woman, child and man, were and are bearers of the image of God. The stories of struggle for human dignity in South Africa and Nazi Germany have their forerunner in the Gospels, in the life of Jesus. God took and takes sides.

Amen.