

13th Sunday after Trinity

Tidenham Church

3.9.23

Greenbelt, Discipleship & Jerusalem

Canon Ed Pruen

Romans 12.9-end

Matthew 16.21-end

Let us pray:

God of grace, we pray that you would inspire us with the light of your truth and encourage us with the flame of hope.

In your name we pray. Amen.

This time last Sunday, I was sat in a field somewhere in Northamptonshire.

We were having an outdoor service of Holy Communion.

It was hard to tell how many people had shown up – but I guess around 15 – 20 ... *thousand* people.

So sharing the peace took a while!

We were camping at the 50th Anniversary of the Greenbelt Festival – a truly incredible gathering for the arts, Christian activism and belief.

What was perhaps especially significant this year was the number of young people, who had come together to engage in the challenges we face in the world –

both in this present age and in the years to come, and to find a way to live in a radically different way.

And yet, woven throughout the whole festival, were the seeds of hope and a real sense of joy.

Now Jesus, in our Gospel reading, was facing a very personal challenge as he set his face to Jerusalem.

Jesus, was living on “death row”.

He knew that he was soon to:

“go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and ...”

and here comes the hope and the joy:

“on the third day be raised to life”.

Jesus knew the nature of his death, the “how” it was going to happen and pretty much the “when”.

From childhood he had seen countless crucifixions.

The Romans always ensured that they were as public as possible, by way of a warning and to make sure everyone knew who was in charge.

It was not a pretty sight, and Jesus would have known the sickening fear that they created.

This fear that Jesus was experiencing was very real and at times overwhelmed him. So we read:

Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’

But Jesus rebukes him and says to his disciples:

‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’

But Jesus, all along, has a reason for turning his face to Jerusalem and his impending nightmare.

And it was in Gethsemane that Jesus resolved that he was not going to die *of* something, but *for* something.

He was not simply going to die *of* crucifixion but *for* our salvation.

He set his face to Jerusalem so that we might be saved.

But saved from what?

We often talk about being saved from sin – saved from the consequences of what we do wrong in life – and to find forgiveness.

Well, all of that is true – but it is not the whole story.

We are not just saved *from* something, but *for* something.

We are saved ... so that we might have the opportunity to live as Christ lived - in a radically different way?

Are we living in a radically different way?

What does that look like?

Well, it is best summed up in our first reading from the book of Romans:

(Romans 12.9-end)

Our love will be completely sincere.

We hate only what is evil.

Our inner hope keeps us joyful.

We are patient in our troubles, and pray constantly.

We share our belongings with the poor, and open our homes to refugees and those seeking safety.

We seek to live in peace with everybody.

We never take revenge.

We feed our enemies; we conquer evil with good.

This is why Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem, so that we might be saved ... to live in this way.

I have been to Jerusalem quite a few times now, and once, we very nearly lived there.

It is the most extraordinary place on earth. There is no other city like it.

Nothing can quite prepare you for the intensity of the place.

It's busy streets, traffic, the heat of the day, people of all nationalities and religions staying in its 9,000 hotels.

Conscripted teenage Israeli soldiers with machine guns, randomly stopping you and asking for your ID.

And then the Old City – a maze of tiny streets, tourists, the smells of spices, orthodox Jews brushing past devout Muslims, Christian pilgrims, souvenirs.

To stand on the Mount of Olives and look across the valley, can leave you completely speechless.

As Benjamin Disraeli once said:

The view of Jerusalem is the history of the world; it is more; it is the history of heaven and earth.

But Jerusalem has a way of disappointing and tormenting its visitors.

The contrast between the real and heavenly cities is so vast that a hundred patients a year are admitted to the city's psychiatric hospitals, suffering from what is known as '*Jerusalem Syndrome*', a madness of anticipation, disappointment and delusion.

Sometimes tourists afflicted with it have been found wandering in the Judean desert wrapped in hotel bed sheets or camped in front of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, convinced they are the messiah.

Jerusalem can send people insane!

In its 5,000 years of recorded human history there have been 180 conflicts around the city.

It has been conquered 44 times, and completely destroyed twice. And war still shapes the geography of Jerusalem.

The Old City of Jerusalem is less than one square mile - yet it has over 2,000 important sites and monuments and is sacred to the world's Jews, Muslims and Christians.

For Christians, with a rapidly reducing population of only about 14,000 souls, or 2% of Jerusalem's total, the city is the site of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

For Jews, who comprise 62% of the population, Jerusalem is the holiest city in the world.

For Muslims, who make up more than a third of Jerusalem's population, the city is one of Islam's holiest sites, after Mecca and Medina.

Listen to these ancient words, they come from the Babylonian Talmud, written before the 8th century but with its roots in the Old Testament.

*Ten measures of beauty God gave to the world,
Nine for Jerusalem, one for the rest;*

*Ten measures of sorrow, God gave to the world,
Nine for Jerusalem, one for the rest.*

And Jerusalem is a place of sorrow – especially today, as it is argued over by far-right evangelicals, occupied and fragmented by the Israelis, and as Palestinian homes are constantly demolished or stolen by violent Israeli Settlers mostly from America.

In Luke 19:41, we are told that *“when Jesus was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it...”*

The scene is a sad one. Jesus, the Messiah, comes near the city of Jerusalem, and weeps over it.

We’re told that he cried for Jerusalem at least three times. And each time was over the tragedy of a lost opportunity.

Their Saviour came to their city, but they would not receive Him.

In Luke 13, Jesus says:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how

often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

It’s a beautiful image of the mothering nature of God.

We often say God is Father, the best father we could possibly have, or even the father we may never have known.

But God is also mother. One who nurtures, protects, gathers us up and holds us safe. Welcoming the stranger into his fold.

Sat in that field last week, at the Greenbelt Festival, sharing bread and wine together, we were surrounded by countless people who have chosen to be gathered up by God and to give of themselves to live a radically different life – however costly.

But the heart of the Christian life, and the heart of the Greenbelt Festival, is first and foremost about discovering we are **loved** by our Creator.

This discovery changes us.

Jesus always works with the raw material of diversity and so whoever we are, whatever gender or race, whether we are seeking asylum, safety from war or hunger, whether we are neurodiverse, left, right or center, whether we are Muslim, Christian or Jew – we are loved.

We are also deeply **valued** – in that we are worth dying for, worth turning our face to Jerusalem for, facing crucifixion just for you ... and for me.

And the hope and joy woven throughout our faith, is that we are **eternally safe**.
We too seek asylum, a place of eternal safety.

But Jesus said to his disciples, and says to us:

‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

What he is saying is that to be his follower we give up saving ourselves – and choose instead the values of the Kingdom of God.

Being a disciple is not necessarily about being a missionary in Africa.

Being a disciple is not always about crossing the sea, but about seeing the cross and taking it up.

Being a disciple does not mean we all have to study theology, as some do, or working in a place of great need, as many do.

Being a disciple is not about *how* we follow, but *who* we follow.

That is your calling, and responding to it gives the meaning for your soul.

Amen.