

JERUSALEM 2

Passion Sunday

18 March 2018

Last week, Fr. Nicholas and I reflected on the place of Jerusalem - Jesus' final destination - in the consciousness of Christians across the ages. In my own sermon I reflected upon the interplay of light and dark, gift and possession, devotion and violence, that has swirled around that city over the centuries, and how, in the face of it, we need to struggle in faith to find a 'Jerusalem of the heart'.

For Jesus' disciples, Galilean though they were, that 'Jerusalem of the heart' was inextricably tied in to the 'Jerusalem of stone and mortar, of marble and gold' that they saw above them as they approached it on their final journey with their Master. He had told them, time and time again, that he was going up to the city of his people's heart not to triumph, but to be arrested, condemned and executed. All the evidence of the Gospels is that this message had just not sunk in. Instead, their hearts and minds were fixed on the coming of their Lord to his City. Together, they would begin a glorious chapter in their people's history; their Lord ruling in triumph, themselves held in high honour. Jerusalem would again be the centre of the Kingdom of their God; the Temple once again made glorious, as the Prophets Ezekiel and Zechariah had foretold.

They were so wrong. Yes, their Master would enter the Holy City in triumph, as we shall celebrate next Sunday. But Jerusalem for Jesus was the place he had to go— 'for it was not fitting that a Prophet perish anywhere but in Jerusalem' It was there that the focus of the fear and hatred against him would come together; it was there that he had to make his final appeal to the leaders of his people, and to receive their verdict.

And in so doing, he re-wrote Jerusalem forever.

For his people it was, had been for centuries the place where their God had resided, where his 'Shekinah', his 'Glory', had descended upon Solomon's Temple, the place where as Solomon prayed, God's 'Name', God's essence' dwelt—and in the process giving glory to his people. That Glory had departed, with the people's exile to Babylon, but it would, it must, return, and the prayer and hope that it would return was common to the Pharisee, the Priestly caste – and the Disciples. The only difference between the first two groups and the last was that for the Pharisees and the Priests, it wasn't Jesus who was going to bring it about. For them, he was in the way.

For Jesus, the 'Jerusalem' of the Pharisees Priests and his own Disciples was a trap; a mirage. His tireless bid to convert his people had failed to create that 'critical mass' of commitment that would have turned Israel as a whole toward the message he had brought from his Father. He had come to see, to understand, that to persist in it would lead to his death, but that paradoxically, it was only his death that would free his people, and humanity as a whole, from the trap it was in.

That truth was the one Jesus spoke of to the Greeks in our Gospel today; that to bear fruit, the grain of wheat has first to die. He had first to die. His 'Jerusalem' – his people's hope of glory – was no coming centre of imperial power; no Temple of gleaming gold and jasper the admiration of the whole world. It was his body, strung up on a Cross – and then...

And there's a paradox here. Because every day, we are to pray, as Jesus taught us, that our 'Father's Kingdom come, that his will be done, on earth, as it is in Heaven'. Does this re-framing that Jesus did, mean that we aren't to work for it practically, aren't meant to try to make the world's structures, our societies, our Health services, Schools, better places, aren't meant to work for peace and justice in our world, and rather just concentrate on spiritual things? Are the politicians right then, when they say the Church should 'stay out of politics' and leave it to them? Are we then to refuse to 'build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land'?

No; we must not, and indeed we cannot, if we are to remain human. But the choice Jesus made has to change the way we do it. The struggle to make our families centres of love, to make this place a place of outreaching joy, to make our society a more just and caring one, to make this planet safer and more fruitful to inhabit for our children and grandchildren to inhabit, not only must continue, but is indeed one of the key ways in which we transform ourselves and each other increasingly into the likeness of our Lord.

Crucial, though - and I use the word advisedly - is the way we set about it; seek to do it at no cost to ourselves, seek to rule out self-sacrifice, and concentrate rather on crafting self-serving deals, reaching for the levers of greed and violence - and all we are doing is attempting to build the Jerusalem of stone and gold again. The Jerusalem of our Lord - the Jerusalem of the grain of wheat - is what we are bidden to work for; so that his Kingdom come. God give us a glimpse of it this Easter.