

'Time of Change' in the Croydon Circuit

Thoughts for Lent 2010

by Harvey, the Superintendent minister

Sunday 28 February

Lent 2 'Love for Jerusalem!'

Guiding text: Luke 13:31-35

- Introductory thoughts:

If the initial focus for Lent was a consideration of our approach to the Desert and the Wilderness of our lives, the next area of thought takes us to Jesus' feelings about Jerusalem. Our Gospel text reveals Jesus' longing for the people of Jerusalem, in the same way as a mother instinctively protects her children, and how a mother hen in the face of danger gathers her brood under her wings. Like the *longing* we spoke of last week with regard to the fruits of the Kingdom, we need to enter into another kind of *longing* – this time to approach the matter of death in the way Jesus does.

So, Lent is a time to face the difficult subject of death. And it is the way, the manner in which we do this, which is of utmost importance.

The way Jesus looks upon the city of Jerusalem will be our guide.

- First pointer:

Jerusalem is the place of death.

He is absolutely clear about that. 'Go tell that fox, it couldn't happen that a prophet would perish anywhere except Jerusalem!' (Luke 13:32,33)

Tom Wright in his book 'Lent for Everyone' writes about the instinct of preservation for children that lies deep within humanity and the whole animal kingdom. What Jesus is saying about his feelings for Jerusalem would have rung bells with his hearers at this level of preservation. 'How many times did I want to collect your children, like a hen gathers her brood under her wings?' When the fire comes raging through the farmyard, the hen gathers the chicks under her wings, and sometimes when the fire is over you will find the moving sight of a dead hen, charred and blackened with the fire and smoke, but with live chicks still huddled under her wings. The mother hen has, quite literally, given her life to save her children.

Jesus, by this pronouncement, is prophesying about the nature of his own death in Jerusalem and how God will save the children of Jerusalem through his death.

We are living at a time in 21st Century when we know that this has indeed taken place, in the 1st Century. So how do we interpret all this today, and here in the churches of the Croydon Circuit?

- Second pointer:

Where is Jerusalem – the dwelling-place of God?

At one level it is clearly the historic City of David, the place revered by Jews, Muslims and Christians alike. So we could interpret Jesus' longing as his desire for all believers (Christians, Muslims and Jews) to be brought together under Christ's sacrificial death and protection.

But I am not wholly persuaded by that, for we also need to recognise that Jerusalem not only slays God's prophets, but it is also the dwelling place of God. The Temple in Jerusalem held a unique place in the minds and hearts of God's people - it was the holy place wherein God had his dwelling. What a strange paradox that the holy place of God was also the place where God's prophets and messengers are exterminated!

I want to suggest that for us, the Croydon Circuit, Jerusalem is indeed the dwelling place of God. But where precisely is that? Is it in our places of worship? Are our churches the present-day equivalent of the Temple of God?

Surely God dwells with his people, with the community of faith. We must give the dignity of Jerusalem to the family of the faithful, to the communities of believers, to our seven churches in the Circuit whose essence is the people - we need to have more emphasis upon the living Body of Christ and less on our buildings.

Jesus' message must include the recognition that God loves the church (the community of Christ) with a deep love and *longing*, so that we can be safe under the protection of Christ's death (his healing wings).

But here's a mystery! Such an interpretation cannot be the whole story. Is it not also true that the whole of humanity is God's dwelling-place? And if so, then our Lent thoughts must consider the far-reaching claim that God is *longing* to gather the whole of humanity under the protection of Christ's sacrificial death. Hence Wesley's conviction that 'All can be saved'.

- Third pointer:

Do prophets still perish in Jerusalem?

Jesus' words seem to be saying that he was aware of the part to be played by the people of Jerusalem in his death. 'It couldn't happen that a prophet would perish anywhere except Jerusalem!'

Could it be true that the people of God today, the members of our church families, (present-day Jerusalem) might be prone to destroy the things of God, his word, his life, his spirit? Such a question seems to be preposterous! How could the people of God reject the things of God?

However preposterous, I believe it is a suitable question for us in Lent. After all, it is so easy to regard our church life in ways that suit us, and us alone. In my experience it is possible for God to be excluded from the life of the church. In fact, I was once accused by a well-meaning church member of 'driving God's spirit out of the church' because I didn't espouse a literal interpretation of the Scriptures! She signed her accusatory letter with 'Yours in the love of the Lord'.

So, it is appropriate to examine ourselves and ask if we might have come near to ever having a part to play in 'crucifying Christ', of destroying the very things of God. It is appropriate, even if it is outrageous.

And if this is so for the community of faith, it must also be true of the whole of humanity – since we have noted that our present-day Jerusalem covers all people, as well as the household of faith.

- Concluding remarks

Last week we saw how Temptation, Struggle and Longing were important Lent activities. This week, I am suggesting we see that the meaning of Christ's death lies at the heart of our Lenten discipline. It is Christ's will, his desire, to gather the whole of humanity under his saving healing wings – but, as we have read 'they would have none of it!' (Luke 13:34).

As we continue to keep in mind the right use of the resources of our Circuit, let us find a moment

1. to recollect that we, as God's people, are loved by Christ with a deep love and a profound longing (like a mother hen), and
2. to remember that Christ has died to demonstrate the extent of that love and that longing, and
3. to ask ourselves how we are responding to such love and such longing.

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