

## Sunday 17 February 2008: Second Sunday of Lent

### God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world

**Readings: Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17**

*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world*

At first sight, these seem to be comforting words to hear. But, you begin to wonder how is that the case in the context of John's Gospel when Jesus argues with Nicodemus saying: "are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" 'Not to condemn the world' does not quite fit the conversation. Nicodemus tells Jesus: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God". It is as if Nicodemus has this anxiety to know more from Jesus; it is as if he wants to stand on the right side of God, to align himself with God. He fears being on the wrong side, so to speak.

Nicodemus' questioning and condition may sound too simplistic to us; but I believe that this is the kind of anxiety we all have when we are faced with uncertainty. I come from a land we call holy, where both protagonists in the conflict, Israelis and Palestinians, react to the other from the perspective of fear, when no one really is free or secure; they are both a prey to the temptations that lead people to violence with unceasing struggle for territory. Similarly, in the West, people are not free from fear either. The predominantly secular culture in which we find ourselves promises autonomy and freedom, but actually leaves a vacuum. Left to ourselves, we are faced with a fearful void, a bleak absence that we *fear*. The signs of this fear are clear in the options available in our global cultures today. For, we either refuse God, because we think that God is a threat to our autonomy and individuality – even to our own identity – or God becomes simply enlisted as another party member fighting for space against those whom we fear. These two options can be summed up broadly in two groups: militant secularism, or religious fundamentalism.

Both militant secularists today, and what we call 'evangelical fundamentalists' or indeed 'Islamists', share the same language. Both want to know, like Nicodemus perhaps, that they are all right, and produce muscular manifestations of how righteous they are in their different ways, either to please themselves, or to please the god they have made in their own image.

This leads us to use God to bless our invasion of Iraq, we use God to justify the expansion of illegal settlements in Palestine, we are happy for the siege of Gaza to escalate, and allow the millions to hunger; we use God to justify suicide bombing; and we are scared to death when the word *Sharia* is uttered in our culture, though we may have no idea what it means, save of what we hear from the media. And so we create all sorts of ways in which we can be sure of having our own way done, and nothing else. We are too concerned with our own security and our prosperity, only to discover that our security and prosperity can only happen with our full acceptance of the real and concrete danger of pursuing faithfulness in this world; as we heard of Abraham's call in the first lesson, this is an acceptance of risk and mortality, and is the fruit of truthful connection with reality, and honest surrender to, and trust in, God; or as Jesus put it: 'we must be born from above... born of water and the Spirit'.

About five years ago, when I lived and worked at the Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem, at the end of a long day of work, of too much administrative stuff, the daily celebration of the Eucharist, morning and evening prayer, meeting visitors and looking after guests at the Cathedral Guest House, I went home, kicked off the shoes, prepared a bath, found a glass of Gin and Tonic, switched on the music, in the hope of switching myself off. Unfortunately, my doorbell was ringing as I started to calm down. And so I went to answer the door, not knowing what awaits me. There was a lady standing at the door, and she had come from Bethlehem; she crossed to Jerusalem via side routes for she did not have the right permit that allowed her to cross through the normal checkpoint. She carried Christmas cards made in Bethlehem, and she was hoping to sell them so that she can earn some money for her family. She took the risk of crossing the military checkpoint, and came all the way to me. I stood there and, as priests normally do, said to her: "I cannot take this now; I am tired, and have not the time". She did not want to leave the door, and kept standing in her place. I was not sure what to do; I was angry with the Gateman who allowed her in, and I wanted to rest, but could not. She stood there and said: "I need you to help me". In response, I said: "everybody wants me to help them, nobody wants to help me". She kept standing there. I said to her then: "if I help you, what can you do to help me?" She said: "I will come next time, and bring some woodwork from Bethlehem made by my own family". I said: "Good, what about a nice wooden cross, which we can use in the Cathedral". I took the cards, paid her money, and she left. I thought that like most others, she probably will not return.

Two weeks later, she did. She came again, and she brought me a wooden cross, made from the olive wood of Bethlehem. However, the wood was so bloody looking. It had too much red on it. I said: "why is it too bloody looking?" Surely, we cannot use a dirty one in the Church. She said to me in her rather crying face: "I have made something which expresses a little bit of my own pain and of my own suffering. You did not want to help me, but I have done this to try and find consolation, through him who was born in Bethlehem, and was killed in Jerusalem". I stood listening to her, as if having some moments to reflect on her answer, but the truth of the matter is that I felt so stupid, so foolish. I was too worried about myself. I was too much part of the Church's anxiety to guarantee our own judgments. I was someone who thought had acquired *wisdom* in my dealing with things. But, there in that encounter with the lady from Bethlehem, my wisdom was judged. As she pointed to the cross, I was struck with God's freedom and power made manifest in his weakness, vulnerability and silence.

This season of Lent is a space for us to remember God. But, unlike Nicodemus, to remember that God is free from our way of scoring points against each other, and our efforts of being on the right side of things. He will not come to our aid to secure our self-enclosed strategies. The Cross – the Passions of Christ – is indeed a condemnation of our ways of making God in our own image.

Now, you might say that we have no choice but to make decisions to move on with our own lives. True. But, if we can muster enough humility and acknowledge that our actions and decisions are human actions that need to be exposed to the prior truth of God, because that truth does not reside within us, we shall begin to learn some wisdom. For the Christian, learning this language is not dependent only on Revealed Law and Wisdom, as it is for the Jew and the Muslim; it is also dependent on being exposed to the human life of Jesus as God's gift and way of making us learn what it is to be truly human.

All of this appears to be a condemnation to our self-enclosed, unaided efforts for success and prosperity. How come then we hear that God did not send the Son to condemn the world? He

obviously has. But, perhaps the writer of the Gospel wanted us to remember that God, after all, is for *all* – He saves even those who are different from us, and we may not like. But, in order for God to be for all, God should be free from our own limited affiliations, and our own self-enclosed interests, even if we are the Church. And so, God in Christ is indeed free, because on the cross, God appears in the most unlikely space to be, a dead man, judged by religion and politics. His resurrection is the sign that he is free for all. He is not only a God of oppressed Palestinians, or the powerful, yet scared, Israelis separately. He is not only a God of conservative Anglicans, or liberal Episcopalians alone; he is not ‘my God’, or ‘our God’ only. There is no freedom in such a god. We have come this morning to celebrate this Eucharist, as a sign and a tangible expression of our liberation from such a god, acknowledging at the same time our hunger and need for continuous learning and growth into a new humanity he desires for us all, but, which we can only hope to receive through his gift, and not through our own self-justified means.