

Sunday 15 November: Second Sunday before Advent

Violence and the Empty Tomb

Readings: Hebrews 10.1-14, 19-25; Mark 13.1-8

I had two meetings this past week at the other end of Whitehall, and walking down there it was impossible not to be moved by the rows and rows of poppy wreaths that surround the simple stone structure that we call the Cenotaph – the Greek word meaning “empty tomb”. In complete contrast to the flag-waving crowds, the enthusiasm, even euphoria at the outbreak of war in 1914, this focus of our remembrance, this empty tomb was built in 1920 in testimony to the broken dreams, broken bodies and broken lives of an entire generation. The testimony to a bloody war where violence begat only more violence. Testimony to a war, which, if there was to be any sense in it, if there was to be any meaning in it, had to be the war to end all wars. But, as it turned out, it made no sense, and it didn’t end war. In contemplating our violent century, any meaning, any promise of lasting peace, has turned out to be as empty as the tomb itself. For those who died, for those who survived, this tomb is simply an ending. A past with no future.

As Christians, we often seek to counter such apparently meaningless destruction, with a happier vision – of lions lying down with lambs, of swords being beaten into ploughshares, of the meek inheriting the earth. We strive to construct a picture of inevitable progress towards a brighter future. But there’s something wrong with that picture. And that something is reality. The reality that shows there’s nothing in the slightest bit inevitable about progress towards peace; that swords seem to multiply rather than diminish; and that the meek have inherited only more suffering.

But the other thing that’s wrong with this picture, is that’s not what the bible says. Today’s Gospel reading about the destruction of Jerusalem; about the confusion and distress of the end times; of a future filled with wars and rumours of wars is not just an isolated, embarrassing passage to be swept under the carpet. In fact, it’s highly representative of much of the Old Testament, elements of all of the Gospels, some fairly big chunks of St Paul, and, of course, the entirety of the Book of Revelation. So it’s simply not good enough to try to ignore it, and construct a narrative solely of sunny optimism

So what is Jesus saying here? Well, let me first be clear what I think he is not saying. This not an invitation to, or a validation of, violence. Jesus is using traditional prophetic language relating to the Day of Lord, the saving of Israel. But in no way does it mean that we should welcome or, even worse, initiate violence in order to hasten the Kingdom. And another thing he is most definitely not saying, is that there is a vengeful Father who requires a cleansing of humanity through war and violence. That cannot be, if the Cross is to have any meaning at all; if the sacrifice of our God for us, is to have any meaning.

So what is Jesus saying? Two things perhaps. First, and on a very basic level, he makes simple prediction. The temple was destroyed within 40 years, and we have had two thousand years since then filled with wars and rumours of wars. But he also has to be saying a lot more than that. What does it mean that the God made man, the God who would die on the cross for our sins, should talk about the inevitability of violence, destruction and war? Well, I think what he is saying, and what we are now very loathe to admit, is that violence is all around us, but, much more importantly, also deep within us – within us all. It is, quite simply, part of our human condition. Now, is that the whole story? By no means. We can laugh, and love, and live lives of selfless devotion. Or, as we see today, we can have babies – Anoushka and

Iliana – who are miracles, and whom we joyously baptise in the hearts of their families. We do indeed have within us the spark of our Maker. But – but – the violence, the shadow, is also always there.

And violence is everywhere. It isn't just about war, or physical acts, or what one individual might do to another. It can involve not just fists and bullets, but words, emotions, even economics. And it doesn't just take place on the battlefield, but in the home, the office, and, worst of all, the Church. It can be collective, in a group, or as a nation. Now, to be sure, we can – we do – deny in any number of high-sounding ways that we have the capacity for violence. But if we do that, then all that we really do is to disguise that urge, to rationalize it, and, thus, ultimately, to sanction it. Violence is a fact.

So I return to an earlier question. If we have this violence within us, and if the future is violent, for what exactly did Jesus die on the cross? Well, I think the reading from Hebrews actually helps us with that. It talks of the failure of the old forms of sacrifice, and the promise of Christ's new sacrifice. What the reading is saying is that prior to Jesus, sacrifice required an innocent victim, an outsider, a scapegoat, onto whom the guilty could shift their sin, their violence. It worked, but it constantly required new victims. It was a self-fueling cycle of violence. And then Jesus came, and broke this sacrificial system wide open. The sacrifice of the innocent Son of God made clear that all the victims were innocent – and we were shown for the first time how the cycle of violence might be permanently ended, rather than temporarily suppressed.

So how do we stop the cycle? The simple answer – not the easy answer, but the simple answer – is by understanding what Jesus did, and recognizing this violence for what it is. By recognizing in ourselves the urge to retaliate, the urge for revenge, the urge to victimize. And by recognizing that we continue to try to overcome this urge by finding new ways to blame the outcast, the stranger, the “other” whether on the grounds of their colour, or gender, or nationality, religion, denomination, sexual orientation. But once we have recognized, have acknowledged this urge to violence, we then need to talk, to relate, to those who would be our victims. If we do that to those we regard as our enemies, then we will start to realize that the stranger, the outsider, is actually also a human. And that realization – with lots of backsliding along the way – may just help us, occasionally, to resist the urge to violence of which we are now, at last, aware.

Let me close by returning to where we started, to the empty tomb of the victim of a violent death. But here the death and violence is the beginning of the story, not the end. So the emptiness of this tomb, missing now the body of our sacrificed and risen God – even after two thousand years of continuing violence and destruction – becomes filled not with despair but with hope; becomes a beginning, not an ending; becomes the promise of the future, not the ending of a shattered dream. Because he took the full force of violence on himself, precisely to break the grip of violence – at this empty tomb, we won't mourn what we have lost, but rejoice at what we have gained. We may fail, we may not secure the future – we are imperfect – and there may still be wars and rumours of wars, even apocalyptic destruction. But what has changed – even as we stand in the midst of a violent world – is that we can have hope – even if tempered by a dark reality. Because we have had the chance to glimpse the Kingdom, and, more than that, have been given the chance to bring it about. For we have been shown, through the darkness, a glimpse of the perfection, of the making of all things new, that will exist when violence is no more.

Amen.