

The Places of the Passion

2. The Temple in Jerusalem

In 1968, Martin Luther King addressed a massive crowd in Memphis, Tennessee where the city's sanitation workers were striking. At heart it was a fight for racial equality and freedom. He said:

'But it really doesn't matter to me now, because I've been to the mountaintop...I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you buy I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the promised land'.

It would be hard to know what was in the hearts and minds of the Israelite people as, after forty years wandering in the wilderness, struggling to escape from the Egyptians who had enslaved them, with all that enslavement meant...drudgery, dehumanisation-being treated like an animal, torture, rape, murder, abuse, lack of any personal freedom...they looked at last at the Promised Land, a land for them to live in as a free people promised by their God as long back in history as Abraham a thousand years before. Although, Like Martin Luther King, Moses had led them through the desert he, like King, was not to be with them as they entered their new free life. They believed that God had told them to build a sanctuary; a holy of holies; a temple. So, they looked to Mount Zion at the centre of what would become the new city of Jerusalem and there they built: with the Ark of the Covenant, which they had carried through desert as a symbol of God's presence in their midst, at the centre of the Temple. It contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments which Moses had been given by God on Horeb and jars of the manna which had been given them to sustain them. Also, there was Aaron's rod: which, when the twelve tribes of Israel had been challenged to see which of them should provide priests, was thrust in the ground and sprouted. Over the coming centuries the Temple was to be desecrated and destroyed over and over again by invading marauders, but always it was rebuilt: a physical symbol at the heart of the Jewish nation of their struggles, their freedom, their faith, their proud sense of themselves as a free nation. Think of how the Ukrainians are fighting for their autonomy at the moment, and you get a sense of the importance of the Temple in Israel and Judah's life. After his triumphal entry through the Golden Gate into Jerusalem, it was for this Temple-the beating heart of Jewish life and faith-that Jesus made first.

Bishop Richard Holloway, former Primus of Scotland, wrote concerning his problems with our own Church today:

If the original purpose of Christianity was to carry the spirit of Jesus through history, then it soon fell into the trap of using most of its energies to maintain itself and the life to which it had grown accustomed.

Chastening words: when Christ made for the Temple and, in a fit of fury which we have largely whitewashed out of the 'gentle Jesus meek and mild' we imagine today, he overturns the tables of the money changers. And as he overturns those tables, he overturns the peddling of goods for money to maintain the Temple: he undercuts all that the Jewish people have grown to hold dear. The Temple was meant to be a powerful symbol of God-given freedom, but has become just one more coercive enslavement, one more subtle chain around the people. You see, there is a curious kind of comfort and security in enslavement.

But he goes further, as the tables are overturned, he is overturning the manipulative power of the Temple authorities, those who have much to gain personally from the comfortable life the Temple *has given them*. And, in doing that, he overthrows the power and influence of those who collude with the Roman overlord and invader who look on from the Praetorium above the Temple to ensure that this enslaved people do not rebel, do not try to claim their freedom. And, in doing that, Jesus sends a message which reverberates through history to all those people and institutions whose creation and mission in the first place was life-affirming and freedom-giving but have now been corrupted by comfort, wealth and personal gain. He overturns all corrupt government power, all abusive relationships, all manipulative and coercive situations. Yes, and he even overturns the tables of his Body, the Church.

And the call of that overturning is a call back to freedom, freedom from all that enslaves us daily: love of power, hatred, resentment, greed, childish dependence, and much more. It is a call for us and the world in which we live to be free from all that. And what is this unfettered and joyous freedom we are called to. Bishop John Spong says of it...

The good of all religion is not to prepare us to enter the next life, it is a call to live now, to love now, to be now and, in that way to be part of a life that is eternal, a love that is barrier free and the being of a fully self-conscious humanity.

An argument can be made that the square mile of land in Jerusalem on which the Temple was built, a square mile which has seen conflict and turmoil from its beginnings, is today one of the most important sources of world conflict perpetrating, as it does, the deep, long held, ravines of hatred and distrust between Hebrew and Muslim, between West and East. The Temple was finally destroyed by the Romans in 70AD. All that was left was the Western Wall-the Wailing Wall. The ascendancy in power of Islam built the Dome of the Rock there-the third most important site of Islam-the nearby Christian church was turned into the Al-Aqsa Mosque. And there are those who believe that the Messiah cannot now appear unless the Temple is re-built and all that is there now destroyed. A place that came into being for many faiths as a place pointing us to freedom, still enslaves us in violence and hatred.

Perhaps we might remember the true message of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We have grown accustomed to understanding it as a fable which speaks of how compassion and care are to be found in the most surprising of places: the Jews hated and despised the Samaritans as cursed foreign usurpers of their faith and yet, as the priest and the Levite pass by the beaten-up man, bruised and battered, it is a Samaritan who stops, binds up his wounds, cares for him and gives money for his shelter. A story about love in surprising places or not judging a book by its cover? No: you see, the road where the story takes place was the ritual road between Jerusalem and Jericho: the priest and the Levite were servants in the Temple and were going to their lodgings. They were ritually clean and any contact with blood or a dead body would have meant weeks of ritual cleansing again. They pass swiftly by...it weighed more with those who thought he might be dead and defiling to the touch whose business was with holy things that he might be alive and in need of care.

We may think we have got to the Promised Land, but we may just have entered slavery again.

The author, Jeanette Winterson, herself the subject of considerable abuse and coercive control by the Church, writes...

In a world that has become instrumental and utilitarian, the symbol of the Kingdom of God-and it is a symbol not a place-stands as a challenge, of love to the arrogance of power and the delusions of wealth.

This motif: that of faith being a journey from slavery to freedom, is a constant motif of the human condition even to today-as Dr Martin Luther King so eloquently explained. Our existential fear of our own mortality and of physical death can, paradoxically, be seen to have narrowed down Our Lord's ministry, Passion, Death and Resurrection to be merely about life after death. And, no doubt, at least part of the beauty and richness of our resurrection faith is the release it holds out to us from the slavery of fear of death. But it is much, much more: the things that enslave us in this life are too prevalent, too pervasive, too spiritually destructive, too death bringing: Christ overturns the tables of all that enslaves us and offers us new life, new hope and resurrection: freedom!

Nelson Mandela writes about his own struggle and life's mission...

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.