

Passion (Palm) Sunday 2017

Today, a day of two processions, one to Jerusalem and another to Golgotha has become a day of protest for many. Increasingly groups use today as an opportunity to gather and rally, to protest; give voice to political and societal issues, refugees, climate change, poverty, injustice, peace. Clearly the arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem on that fateful day 2,000 years or so ago was a protest. Matthew tells us that Jesus went first to the temple where he overturned the tables of the money changers, this protest would find its awful climax, as we heard this morning, a few days later on the hill of Calvary.

But this is no ordinary protest. Ultimately Jesus was to be alone in his protest on that Friday afternoon. Clearly those who welcomed him to Jerusalem saw in him the beginning of a movement that would overturn the order of the day, how quickly it evaporated.

Charles Dickens began his novel 'The tale of two cities' in this way: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...' The novel is set in London and Paris. Dickens writes of the plight of the French poor leading to revolution and the brutality of the revolutionaries as they endeavoured to destroy the aristocracy. He draws unflattering parallels with the London of his day. Victorian England was ripe for revolt as the gap between rich and poor widened.

In the time of Jesus clearly the people of Jerusalem despaired, they sought revolution. Barrabas the zealot had led the people in a popular revolt against Roman authority, it was quickly quashed. The Sanhedrin sought victory through knowledge; but they became preoccupied with the law. Rather than lift the peoples burdens, they added to them. The Essenes withdrew from the public space to cultivate an inner peace. The Herodians attempted compromise with the ruling class, some connived with the Romans and were hated for it. To whom could people turn for leadership? Clearly the death of Jesus was seen as the end of another revolutionary movement. Jesus' lieutenants had fled, a few fearless women were all that remained.

The central theme in Dicken's novel is that of sacrifice and resurrection. Two metaphorical cities. For Dickens both were crucial to any protest movement to any revolution. Jesus knew this, his predictions of his passion and death were unambiguous. Whatever Jesus' self-understanding he knew that he would have to give his life. Sacrifice and resurrection, criticism and hope. This is the prophetic Jesus and his death the ultimate prophetic act.

What of our protests today what of our rallies? We must voice our concerns, we must speak for the voiceless and the powerless. But we must be mindful of being in only one of the two processions, a resident of only one metaphorical city. If we are merely waving our palms, then our voices will not be heard; criticism without hope is no prophecy. We must be prepared to walk the way of Calvary too.

There is something very distinctive about Christian life and protest. We called to prayer yes and we must pray for those who are marginalized in whatever way. It is an act of faith, faith which we are told will move mountains. But we are called to more. As one writer put it; 'Christianity requires everything of you, but when you have accomplished everything it requires, all the same, that you realise you have been saved by grace alone and nothing else.'

We join our protests today with those of Jesus. We wave our palm branches defiantly yes, but in the knowledge that we too must carry our crosses.