

Third Sunday of Easter – 2018

Putting the Bible into the hands of the uninitiated is both a wonderful and fearful thing - the scriptures are both of these and more. So where do you tell someone you knows nothing, to start? I don't think the beginning is always helpful. I recommend Exodus if you like a ripping yarn, and then some of the second part of Isaiah if poetry is your thing and perhaps some of the Psalms and then Luke's gospel. As an aside when our youngsters begin their confirmation preparation very soon, we will be starting off with 'The Prince of Egypt,' it's a great movie!

In Matthew's gospel Jesus states: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.' I think we can understand the first part of this because I think that most of us have an appreciation of the difference between the spirit and the letter of the law. Jesus clashed with those who upheld the letter of the law but failed to understand the spirit. But what of Jesus fulfilling the prophets as we heard today in Luke: 'everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' How do understand this? This is why I give my reading suggestions!

One of the most profound moments of Holy Week – and there are many, is the opening of the Good Friday liturgy, the silent entry, the opening prayer and then the reading from Isaiah:

*It was our pain that he bore, our sufferings he endured.
We thought of him as stricken, struck down by God and afflicted,
But he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity.
He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed.*

Jesus clearly saw himself as standing in the great prophetic tradition of Isaiah. Remember at the beginning of Luke's gospel he pronounces in the synagogue:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Yes, Jesus fulfilled this prophecy, but he did so in a way that no one could ever have thought possible. The radical newness that Jesus brings to these prophetic utterances was beyond the wildest imagination and it is that radical newness that the disciples struggled to understand and we too struggle to grasp, such is its newness... even in our own day, the gospel is radically new!

Our preacher on Easter Day welcomed us to the Revolution, and yes it is indeed! But it is a revolution like no other. We are familiar with revolutions, in England the revolution which brought about the downfall of the monarchy of Charles I gave us Cromwell, not exactly evil but certainly dull! The French revolution which did away with the monarchy gave us Napoleon, a megalomaniac and the Russian revolution ... well that gave some of the notorious characters in history. Indeed in these revolutions there is merely a returning to old ways. It is, it seems, the outcome of all revolution, they are never new, not completely, they are always in some way derivative of went before; that's why they're called revolutions, they go round!!

Moses sought to bring about a revolution in the liberation of the slaves he led out of Egypt from under the regime of the Pharaoh. But they very quickly found it was not the revolution they wanted, at one point they asked to go back to Egypt and soon

the Israelites would be held under the regime of the Davidic monarchy – a very mixed bunch indeed. In Isaiah we are told of the second Exodus from Babylon back to Jerusalem to a renewed city. Freed from the Babylonians by the King of Persia, the people of Israel return to the Holy City and would soon to be held in the thrall of the Greeks and the Romans. What is being described is a returning; a renewal yes, on one level, but importantly a returning. It's what the people wanted, it is so often what we want, the status quo and in the psalms particularly we hear about 'former times.' But Isaiah is wary of the good ol' days, he writes:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

This is how we begin to understand prophetic fulfillment, Jesus in the footsteps of Isaiah takes these ancient narratives and gives them a new understanding, but in him they are almost unrecognizable and they reach their zenith in the resurrection, this is new, there is no returning.

The Easter revolution was like no other; so new, so radical it has transfixed and held us to this very day! Despite the naysayers, despite the fact that we are told such things just don't happen, despite the awkwardness of professing belief in the resurrection we continue to believe because we hold to a faith that says 'behold I make all things new.'

Nowhere is this newness called for more than in the peace that the risen Jesus offers his disciples. The news from Syria at the moment shocks us, we are startled and terrified too by the rhetoric that seems at times to be nothing more than provocation at the level of a schoolyard argument and in the midst of all this we hear those words of Jesus to those confused, frightened individuals 'Peace be with you.' John's gospel perhaps helps us a little: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.' This peace then that the risen Jesus offers his friends is not something that we can immediately grasp, it is not a 'John Lennon-esque' peace. The peace that Jesus offers is something quite new it is that peace that Paul describes 'as surpassing all understanding.' But where does this leave us?

When we look at the life and message of Jesus in gospels so often we are told that those gathered around Jesus were astonished, amazed, we have never heard anything like this! The resurrection is of this order and it generated and released an energy which we can see so clearly in the Acts of the Apostles. We hold fast to a faith that says that things *do not* have to return to way they were. Indeed when we seek peace it *cannot* be a return to the way things were, to the status quo, but to a new way of living. It is one that perhaps we can barely imagine, but one that we are called to strive for unceasingly. Because this is Jesus' prophetic fulfillment, shown in his death and resurrection.

During my service in Afghanistan I would often wonder about our role in this campaign. I would pray that our role was not just to maintain the status quo but to bring to birth something new, a peace that still remains beyond our understanding. Every morning I would recite the Benedictus from Luke's gospel, deliberately and intentionally.

In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace. Amen.