

SERMON

I'm wondering what it means to call something Holy...though maybe that word doesn't mean much to us anymore. We know what sacred means - sacred places are everywhere' the earth, the sea, the sky, the woods...not to mention sports venues, theatres, artists' studios...there seems to be no limits on what we consider sacred. We save 'Holy' for strange stuff - terrifying things – radical disturbances become 'holy wars'; problem children are 'holy terrors' - you see what I mean? It wasn't always this way. Holy used to be the pinnacle - the Holy city was (in ancient imaginations) was God's earthly dwelling. It was a big deal - in ancient religious thinking - to have a place that God was present. Sacred is the word reserved for things that remind us of God - places (and people) whom God has touched - moments that God honours. Maybe I'm making too much of the difference - maybe you don't care about my fascination with the way language changes - but it's the only way I could begin to approach this morning's gospel lesson.

Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is a puzzling paragraph. Some Pharisees warn Jesus about Herod's plan to kill him. Jesus sends an abrupt message (through them) to Herod (brave fellow...) saying 'he can't kill me now because I'm not in Jerusalem yet, and Jerusalem is where prophets go to die...'

Jerusalem - the Holy city - a place full of sacred significance for Jews, Christians and Muslims. Jerusalem was the centre of the cultural and religious universe in Jesus' day; a city of celebration and sacrifice. The place to be for the high holy days...a place (by some calculations) that Jesus visited close to one hundred times during his life. A place to be loved and, according to Jesus in Luke ch. 13, a place to be feared.

The places that we go to willingly and often - our favourite places - are usually places of comfort and safety. Whether they are towns or specific locations - the cottage, the lake, the arena, the golf course...perhaps even this place...shouldn't these be safe places - sanctuaries? And imagine, for a moment, that suddenly your favourite place is no longer safe...that for whatever reason, there is now an element of danger involved in a trip to the cottage, or a night at the game, or in an act of worship.

We don't have to imagine any more. We have seen, far too often, places of safety - of sanctuary - turned into killing fields. Schools, churches, mosques, synagogues, places of business - places with sacred significance to us; places that ought to be safe...places we cannot abandon because of the possibility of danger...

When Jesus offers his lament over Jerusalem, there is already trouble brewing. He has suggested to his disciples that this cannot end well. To go to the centre of Jewish (and Roman) authority after saying what he has said about earthly authority is to invite correction from those powers. Herod is already looking to have Jesus killed (so say the Pharisees, who have also been publicly chastised by Jesus...) Yet Jesus has his 'face set to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51) - his determination to be once again in the Holy City - to avail himself of its sacred spaces - would not be denied. Is that foolish; suicidal; scandalous; or faithful...?

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...and you were not willing." This image of Jesus being drawn to this place of wonder and ritual and sacred place - in spite of the danger that waits for him - is a powerful image.

A picture of faithful resolve – the notion that nothing will come between Jesus and the significance of the city – is suggested by this moment in Luke's gospel.

Jesus brings to this encounter the memory of festivals and worship - foundational memories linked to the buildings and the atmosphere - no threat would keep Jesus from celebrating the Passover there - from confronting the corruption that threatened to remake the city in a different image.

We know something of that resolve, having seen it at work among student survivors of school shootings and those who march in memory of murdered women and people from faith communities standing peaceful guard around the sacred spaces that have been violated by fear, prejudice and hatred.

School shootings are an affront against things we hold sacred - innocence and knowledge - and thus sacrilege. The murder of faithful people at prayer is a violation of the connection between humanity and the Divine - sacrilege. Jesus' determination to remind the powerful that sacred things were important - his bringing the message of the reign of God to those who thought they knew what power was - results in his arrest and execution. Murder in the name of obedience, or security, or fear is an inexcusable thing, and people everywhere are asked to consider today what it means to call a place safe or sacred – what it means to hold ideas and memories as inviolable – what it means to be human (and humane) when fear threatens to overwhelm us, and terror trespasses on holy ground.

Jesus knows that tension – and names it. There in the centre of his religious and social universe, tragedy waits for him. And on the strength of faith – in the company of God's Spirit – with the certainty bred of Divine Hope, Jesus names the fear and continues on his way. For him, the security of the Spirit's embrace was as real as the human chains that formed around mosques all over the world in the wake of the horrors being played out in Christchurch.

For Jesus, the sanctuary that was Jerusalem was always a problematic mix of joy and sorrow. Such is life, he seems to say, and God waits for us in the midst of life, ready to bless and heal – ready to weep and wonder – ready to make new life out of our deadly and dangerous efforts to make ourselves safe.

I can't tell you that faith will protect us from the kinds of horrors that play out regularly in the world. Jesus never promised safety and security, he promised that God would have God's way in the world...eventually.

In the meantime, we are challenged to face the world in the knowledge that God waits in the midst of us – in our chaos and in our comfort – to honour our sorrow, and enliven our hope. For life (not death) is what we have been promised.

Praise the God of life. Amen