

28A SFX 2023

“He dispatched his troops, destroyed those murderers and burnt their town.”

I have to be honest, there are some Sundays when I think I would not want St Matthew as my Parish Priest. He started out well, he tells how our Lord preaches the Kingdom, speaks of Beatitude and Blessing, of God’s providence and God’s love. But then when autumn sets in a gloom seems to descend upon him, and he begins to despair a little bit too much in his fellow human beings, who struggle to live up to the demands of perfection. These parables of judgment are difficult, in the hands of St Luke they have a different feel. St Matthew leaves us uncomfortable in our seats.

Today’s parable is strange, shocking and disturbing. The king puts on a great wedding feast for his son. The servants go out with his invitations, but the people did not come. Worse some seize his servants, maltreat them and kill them. Why? The king is furious. He retaliates with greater force. “He dispatched his troops, destroyed those murderers and burnt their town.” It shows a world in which evil is more than matched with evil. Why destroy the innocent alongside the guilty in retaliation for murder? Why does St Matthew portray such a world? Because it is our world. Incidentally, the violence in the parable probably reflects the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

This week, after watching horrors unfold in Israel and Palestine, I can only hear the violence in this parable, and I find it very disturbing. If the King is God (is he?) then he seems impulsive and capricious, out for revenge. It all escalates very quickly. It begins with a wedding invitation but ends with a bloodbath.

What Hamas did last weekend in Israel, when they stole into Israeli territory was a savage act of terrorism. It began with a peace festival but where will it end? What they did to old women and children, holocaust survivors, Filipino workers, and even fellow Muslims was brutal and vile. On a Jewish holy day. An act of pure evil. And to still hold those they have not killed hostage? What can be said?

It is true that there is a wider context for this. Gaza has long been like a pressure-cooker, the Palestinians have long been treated with a degree of contempt by their Israeli neighbours, and Israeli settlements have encroached their land condemned by UN conventions as illegal. But it seems that the justified anger of the Israelis is turning into rage and revenge as Gaza is pounded by bombs and violence unleashed upon innocent civilians, men, women and children. There is a lesson here that peace has to be worked at every day, because as in the parable, a perceived slight can become a grievance, can become a cause for destruction and terror. If only they had been polite, said ‘Thank you’ and turned up to the wedding.

Of course, the darker elements of the parable can be explained away – it is after all only a story, told melodramatically for comic effect to wake us up to the gift of the Kingdom. But the tears of children in Israel and Gaza cannot be wished away, cannot be erased. The tears will water the pain and anger, the bitterness and hostility of a new generation of men and women who cannot stomach peace.

It is a crucial reminder that peace has to be worked at every day. We must hear those words of Jesus every day: “Blessed are the peacemakers” for those who slowly, untiringly work for reconciliation, who seek to bring communities and peoples together. And we must not forget in our small-scale lives how peace and charity have to be worked at in our own

homes and communities. Because a small slight, an unintended word, a perceived insult can blow up quickly, and hurts are so difficult to undo.

Anger can be a constructive emotion that helps us seek justice in this world. But it has to be handled so carefully. And most of us don't handle it very well. Because it can fly into rage when reason disappears, and violence and destruction enflame our minds' eyes. This moment when anger turns to rage becomes so dangerous as we see in Israel and Palestine. All we can do from this distance is pray, pray, pray. And seek the truth which is not easy at all, because there is a trail of blood, of grievances and hurts on both sides.

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept." The Jewish people have been cruelly persecuted for far too long. Last week's events their deadliest day since the Holocaust, understandably renewing their fears. Antisemitism in Europe has not gone away. And, not excusing for a moment last weekend's massacre, the Palestinians too have known suffering and marginalisation for far too long, they too have been victims of oppression.

In the midst of this we can only dream of the lion laying down with the lamb. We can only dream with Isaiah of that mountain where *the mourning veil covering all peoples will be lifted, and the shroud enwrapping the nations removed*, when death will be destroyed forever and *the Lord will wipe away the tears from every cheek*. Then the Lord will shepherd us, and goodness and kindness shall follow us into the house of the Lord.

Or we can dwell on the wisdom of St Dorotheus, a 6th century abbot with another vision of the world. He imagined the world as circle, or a wheel, with God at the centre, and us, with all our differences, the around the wheel. We might say today Jews and Christians and Muslims gathered around the edges so different and so seemingly apart.

But Dorotheus imagined that as we each move closer to God at the centre, we inevitably move closer to each other: "When those who wish to come closer to God walk towards the centre of the circle, they come closer to one another at the same time as to God. The closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another. And the closer they come to one another, the closer they come to God."

Perhaps we just have to be more faithful and true to the good God who guides us, and then enemies might become friends, strangers - brothers and sisters, and the irreconcilable brought together in embrace. And as we come closer to God, the good Lord and Shepherd, we will find ourselves dwelling on the holy mountain with all the peoples, as Isaiah says.

Finally, what is the clothing that finds us properly dressed for the feast? It is not love, as St Paul would say? In the face of the violence and sorrow of the world, we who have been invited must clothe ourselves in love.