

THOUGHTS FOR THE START OF HOLY WEEK

Here we are at the start of what I think is the most dramatic week of the Christian year. We have already reflected a little on Palm Sunday and the soon to happen change of the crowd's mood. After the acclamation Jesus receives as he rides into Jerusalem, things darken as he walks along the inexorable road to the Cross.

During this week Christians would normally be observing all sorts of extra acts of worship, some would walk the Via Dolorosa in some form of Stations of the Cross, many would attend Maundy Thursday Eucharists moving into the stark and dramatic "stripping of the altars", to remain in the darkness of a bare church in vigil, which symbolically moves us from the Upper Room to Gethsemane, and Jesus' Agony in the Garden, culminating in betrayal by one of his followers and his arrest.

Then, of course Good Friday with its focus on the trial, and terrible progress to the cross, and Jesus' death, finishing with his battered body being laid in the tomb.

But this year it all feels different, we won't be able to meet together to mark these stages, nor meditate together on the events together either. Nor will we be able to enter together into the "emptiness" of Holy Saturday, before the eruption of celebration for the Risen Lord.

One of the texts often used or referred to during this week is the Old Testament Lamentations of Jeremiah, a short book of 5 chapters following straight on from the book of the prophet by the same name. I've just read it through and yes, it is heartbreaking, and yes, it is gloomy. It laments the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The writer clearly thinks God has deserted Judah, because of its collective sin. The destruction is seen as a punishment. While we may not accept the idea that evil is visited on people because of their deeds, some of the words here have a particular resonance for us in our situation at the moment:-

How lonely sits the city that was once full of people!
How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.
She weeps bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies.

The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to the festivals;
all her gates are desolate, her priests groan;
young girls grieve, and her lot is bitter.
Ch 1: 1-2,4

As I read I could not fail to see some similarities with our present times. Look at the lonely streets, the grief for loved ones, and the inability of family or friends to draw close to loved ones in need of the comforting presence of another. Then there's the invisible fear that stalks, making us all keep our distance, or to back away from others...even one's friends or family may be carrying the virus so the reference to their (unintentional) treachery even rings true. The overwhelming sense of isolation and sadness prevails. And while I may not actually be groaning I am sad that I cannot share this important time with you all.

Lamentations maybe isn't the go to Bible book for the moment, to be perfectly honest...it is not a cheerful read, even at the best of times, yet even in the existential despair there is some hope as the writer has to acknowledge. Later in the book he cries out in hope:-

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
“The Lord is my portion” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him”.
The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.
Ch3: 22- 25

I wonder whether Jesus took time to ponder some of the words from this book. He would have been familiar with them just as he was with the Psalms and the Prophets. Perhaps he too drew comfort from the almost defiant affirmation of hope, despite what he was to endure over the following days.

May the steadfast love of the Lord sustain and strengthen you as we journey together, but separately towards Good Friday.

With love Alice