

Sunday 16th September 2018
Trinity 16 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 50.4-9a

NT: James 3.1-12

G: Mark 8.27-end

Friday 14 September, two days ago, marked the feast of the Holy Cross, a date that celebrates the tradition of finding the wood of the cross credited to Empress Helena the mother of Constantine in the fourth century during the building of Constantine's Church on Golgotha – the site of what is now the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem. Evangelical Christians from the West do not like the Church of the Resurrection and its colourful ancient liturgies. They prefer instead another site that was founded by General Gordon of Khartoum called today 'The Garden Tomb'. You might say, it is a nice garden. For General Gordon, the 'real' tomb of Christ had to be outside the old city walls; for that is what the gospels tell us. And so, he found one tomb, which of course is one of many in Jerusalem. He did not have the luxury of archaeological studies we have today, which remind us that the current walls of Jerusalem's old city are Ottoman walls and not the original Roman walls; and that the site of the Church of the Resurrection today would have been indeed outside the Roman city walls. There is no historical reason to doubt the crucifixion or its location. The Church of the Resurrection is indeed one of the few sites connected with Jesus' story that we can say this is where it actually happened.

But, this nineteenth century development has a nice footnote story, which should be mentioned. Queen Victoria received a letter from general Gordon in which he explains with great Evangelical enthusiasm the finding of the 'real' tomb; Queen Victoria, who had no knowledge of any of this scholarly information, simply wrote

back to him to thank him for his letter and added in a suitable Queenly rebuke: 'We will continue to follow in the tradition of Our cousin Helena'.

The verdict is clear as St. James writes in his letter today: 'the tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity' and the more mistakes and gaffes made by general Gordon and his likes the worse the harm to truth as it gets communicated among many. However, you can say what you like, words cannot be relied on to bury truth at the end. We need something slightly more sophisticated and imaginative than General Gordon's simple explanation.

And so, St. James adds, 'Not many of you can be teachers'. Where shall imaginative wisdom be found? At university, we normally tell ourselves and our students that university life can't be monochrome. We have to ask questions. We can't be satisfied with simple explanations. But, often the more we ask, the stranger the picture begins to look.

We turn to our first reading from Isaiah and we read that wisdom may be found even in the arbitrary and senseless reality of exile, not in a perfect harmonious theory or place. Isaiah 50 is part of what is known as the 'second' book of Isaiah, written during the Babylonian exile of the Jews; chapter 50 has the feel of the wisdom of Job, wisdom is found in the arbitrariness and senselessness of the world's suffering. In Isaiah 50, it is The Suffering Servant who speaks as the teacher who opens his ears to God, but who experiences suffering at the hands of his enemies. This suffering is not passive; rather, the Suffering Servant actively chooses to tread this

path. And so the wise Creator of Israel is experienced even with the lack of moral order in the context.

We look for order and wisdom to control our environment; but the tragedies of the world around us will still come to a more merciless focus. In our Gospel reading today, Peter understands Jesus as Peter wants him to be. The Messiah *could not* possibly suffer and die. Surely Prophets sort out problems, create harmonies, bring order and control things. And Jesus rebukes him back: 'go away from me Satan'. The disciples in Mark's gospel are often portrayed as those who don't get the point. It's others, like the Syro-Phoenician woman, the blind Bartimaeus, the centurion at the cross, who get the point. So where is wise teaching to be found? It's not found with a clear positive orderly theory. It's found with the raising of a question, 'who do people say that I am?' says Jesus; the answer is an unsettling one for the disciples.

If we are only looking for simple explanation, we will soon discover that that is a pointless useless category. To put it more bluntly, to become wiser means becoming more vulnerable. The good teacher is the one who exposes us to the scope of tragedy around us, but still opens our eyes to see *grace* in the midst of it all. The Suffering Servant in Isaiah says: 'The Lord God helps me, therefore I shall not be put to shame'. Whatever that means, it is not about easy explanation of a morally outrageous situation. For the Suffering Servant, the sight of God in the midst of chaos and suffering is the answer. Is this passive acceptance? No; rather, we have here the awareness of grace in the depth of the tragedy.

For us Christians, the teacher who finally converts us into who we truly are is not the one who gives us information, explanation or clear text, but the one who raises questions and who, through human risk and agony brings a new community to birth freed from the constraints of race, status, and gender enabling every human person to claim a common hope through his God-sized Resurrection; because of that Resurrection, St. Paul tells us that the hanged 'criminal' on the cross is the power and the wisdom of God. Truth and wisdom become defined in relation to Jesus who faces and accepts the risks and the tragedies of our world with the authority of God.

The trouble is that we constantly slip back into explaining faith and at times with defensiveness; we should desist simplistic explanations. To the Church, the crucified and Risen Jesus says more. After 2000 years of putting the cross to our own uses, 2000 years of using it again and again to silence and suppress others (Jews above all, but also others), what we have to make sure is that this symbol of suffering and murder is not obliterated. It is there to judge us all.

Those of you who have followed the anti-Semitism row in the Labour party will see how stupid human beings become by explanation and how the tongue is a useless tool so to speak. Everyone ended up using the row to disqualify the other, whoever that other might be. Everyone uses the row to create victims of everybody else. It ceased to be about Anti-Semitism. And Jesus says to Peter: 'Go away from me Satan'. The death and the Cross of Christ force us to think where we might want to cling. We cannot cling to the cross to make sure that he fits our own agenda. We need to acknowledge that there is always a tendency in our hearts to ignore the mixture of motives that lie behind our decisions. Like Peter, we cling to what makes us feel

most safely at a distance from risk. We are missing some adult acknowledgment that even when our purpose is good, our flawed humanity creates new difficulties. Perhaps what Jesus is telling Peter when he rebukes him is simply 'do not use me to fit your agenda; carry your Cross. You need to make the jump and step into the space that I have created for you; you may make mistakes, but I will lead the way'.

As we struggle with the dilemmas of our lives and age, let us try to bring them to the light of the Truth of the cross of Christ, knowing that they might still be affected by our secret desires and failures. We accept that, even as we work for good purposes. Words, the tongue, do not transform the world. If they did, the liar and the ideologue would have things their own way. Instead, as we come to receive Communion, we cling our eyes on the cross and follow Jesus to the Father's heart. We make our mistakes and we own them. We turn away from the seductive lure of being righteous with nothing to repent of, hoping that God will serve our need and that we are always on the right. With Peter, and the other disciples after the Resurrection, we know that there is another true transformation beyond words, if this death, this body we are about to receive is also the word and the act of God. We come seeking to be with Jesus at his table; he responds to us as he told his disciples at the last Supper: 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer'. In response we join Queen Victoria and affirm: 'we will continue to follow in the tradition of (our cousin) Helena'.

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