

Sermon – Proper 28 – Cathedral of the Incarnation

Luke 21:5-19 - Where do we go to from here?

“May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.”

Where do we go to from here? Our nation, and indeed the world is feeling the ripples from Tuesday’s election. Tears of sadness and tears of joy flowed across our country in the early hours of Wednesday morning. Some of you may have been elated at the chance to make a change in the way the nation is governed and the direction that the nation is heading. Some of you may still be in shock and grieving what might have been. Some of you may be fearful that hard won human rights might now be unwound.

This has been a tumultuous week. As we do in times of great uncertainty and shock we gather together in Christ’s name for prayer and reflection. On Wednesday night we gathered at short notice as a community of faith in the soft candlelight glow of the chancel. As I listened to Bishop Larry’s reflection, the image of Jesus upon the cross, naked with arms outstretched in agony appeared to me. The image reflected my dashed hopes and the immense sense of vulnerability I felt.

We can’t deny that the election brought out the worst in our humanity, especially our ability to be divisive and scapegoat others for the real and perceived difficulties we face. We can’t deny that when we feel forgotten we seek out a savior to rescue us and restore us to wholeness. We can’t deny that difference in our community is now feared rather than being celebrated. We can’t deny that the nation stands on the precipice of change.

We all find ourselves standing together on the precipice of the great unknown no matter what your political persuasion. It’s a scary and anxious place to be but here we are nonetheless. We are not alone though in standing on this precipice for we have the memory of many a generation before us standing in a similar position, not knowing what will happen, anxious.

In the period after the signing of the Voting Rights Act by President Johnson in 1965, Dr Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “the line of progress is never straight.”¹ The signing of the Voting Rights Act held out much hope for African Americans, and others, that they would finally be seen as equal citizens in the United States and allowed to vote without restriction. Much blood had been spilt in the years before. So when the long hoped for progress did not materialize, a large section of the community felt betrayed and a counterrevolution started to take hold.

Each step forward down the road of progress can cause a backlash, especially if you find yourself on the backside of that progress. Jesus made his presence felt in three short years

¹ King, ML A *Testament of Hope*, Harper Collins, 1986 p562

speaking to the need for societal change, and modeling God's love for the other through calling for lives to be lived with justice, love and mercy. The backlash was swift and violent. First it claimed his life and then the fledgling community of believers was persecuted for their beliefs and actions for centuries. Without their strength and resolve for truth and progress, we would not be sitting in this church today.

Our gospel reading from Luke takes us back to Jesus' time and to a similar place of uncertainty. The people were gathered admiring the beauty of the temple when Jesus predicted that one day that same temple would be destroyed. The people, feeling their anxiety rising, ask Jesus for certainty. "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is to take place." Jesus though doesn't offer them any timeline to allay their fears or to put rest to their anxiety. Instead he ups the uncertainty by telling them that there will be many natural and manmade calamities to come. Not only is their world to be shaken by great events, but also that their own lives were to be touched by persecution by those in power.

Like a green shoot of life rising out of the rubble of destruction, Jesus portrays this time as an opportunity for them, an opportunity to testify to the call of God to change, to love one another and to seek justice and mercy in the world. He even reassures them that they need not worry about what to say when the time comes, as they will feel the wisdom of God welling up within them, giving them the words and actions they need.

The fix was not to be overnight. Jesus was calling his community to a new way of living, a way that asked them to stand up against the turbulent world, to draw strength and wisdom from their faith and to trust that together they would endure.

We are my friends in the midst of another great event, a revolution that is changing the world and causing people of all tribes, faiths and political persuasions to react. When the industrial revolution moved the world forward from an agrarian society to a mechanized one, many people were left behind, but many people also gained much. The Church responded at that time with significant effort to assist those left behind. We now find ourselves in a technical revolution that is changing the way we communicate with each other, changing the way we manufacture goods and distribute them, and changing the way we live in the world.

Trade borders one staunchly geographical are being changed. Our smartphones are made in China, our clothes in Bangladesh or Cuba. Food comes into our supermarkets from all over the world. We don't seem though to complain about the lower prices we pay for these goods. We benefit. What we don't see, unless we purposefully look, is the countless lives that have been changed as this revolution unfolds. Manufacturing workers in our country have lost thousands of jobs. Manufacturing workers in Asia have gained thousands of jobs and whole nations have benefited whilst some our workers have not. People have been lifted out of poverty and others have been driven into poverty. Tech workers in Silicon Valley have become rich as the poor in the Bay area scramble to find affordable housing.

The line of progress is never straight. Revolutions are not pleasant and many suffer.

Through all of this tumult the body of Christ, the church in the world, is called and recalled to its same mission, that is to restore people to God in Christ. No matter if you are blue or red, we are people of purple together. We are Easter people and purple is the color of our Lenten season, the season of repentance and preparation before Easter. We gather to pray and fast in the darkness before the coming of the light. We are purple together because of our common faith in Jesus Christ. Christ is the savior of our world and he has given us tools to make this world a better place. We are purple together because we remember the backlash against Jesus and the joy of his resurrection.

We are called as the body of Christ in community to be agents of healing. For some of you this will require an enormous effort to find the energy and willingness to reach out to the turbulent world at this time. For others the work of healing might be cathartic. Jesus reminds us in today's gospel reading that we will be given the wisdom to know what to do and words will come to us from the Holy Spirit. We just have to be open to his healing and restorative presence.

As the body of Christ we are called to continually work toward healing division and standing for justice for all with mercy and love. As the new president takes the oath of office and the new cabinet and congress are sworn in, we stand as the church to be the moral and ethical heart of the nation. This could mean for us that we go out to Standing Rock Sioux Reservation and stand with the Lakota people if the new government refuses to reroute the pipeline. It may mean that we have to redouble our giving and support for the Cheyenne River Mission feeding program, if benefits and health insurance get cut to the poor residents living there. It might mean mobilizing ourselves to partner with refugee advocacy groups to protect those that will be denied legal status in the country and now will be abused by many followers of the president elect. It might mean increasing our pastoral support for LGBT people, especially the young ones, who feel threatened by the possible revocation of rights that might lead them to revert to lives of shame and fear. We might need to meet regularly with our young people to help them make sense of the world, help them talk about difference and how we as Christians are called to respond to these difficult times.

At this time we also need to acknowledge the communities and families devastated by the change brought by the technical revolution underway in the world. It might mean partnering with an Episcopal church in West Virginia to provide support for coal miners that are jobless. It might mean we take up prayer support for manufacturers being displaced in the mid-west or high school students facing low paying local jobs in their communities. What all this means is opportunity to engage with our nation as the church in action.

The line of progress is never straight. We often can't see where we are going and seek signs and answers from God. Many seek a savior through the political system. Jesus warns us today that many will lead us astray. Faith in God through Jesus Christ is the only sure thing we have. We are Easter people of faith and what has taken place offers us an immense opportunity to live out our ministry of restoration in our community.

Dr Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention. There is no other answer. Constructive social change will bring certain tranquility; evasion will merely encourage turmoil."²

Together as Easter people we need to pray for the President-elect, his soon to be appointed cabinet and for congress. We need to pray that wisdom will lead them to propose change that will lead to a more just and merciful society. We need to pray for them to repudiate hatred and division in our community, especially in our schools. We need to pray for progress that lifts up the poor and heals the community.

As we struggle to rebalance our lives we remember that we are Christ's body in the world and we need to be engaged. We need to live out our mission as a church to bring about restoration between our community and God. There is no other answer.

Amen

² ibid p568