

The Paradox and the Palms

Beneath the veneer of festivities, 1st Century Jerusalem was a tinderbox of frustrated nationalism and political egos. Among the heaving crowds and fast-food outlets, Roman soldiers patrolled the streets while at the temple the religious ruling classes struggled to maintain an uneasy peace. This festival in particular, the Passover, which commemorated their ancestors' liberation from oppression in Egypt only fueled the deep unrest and resentment caused by the Roman occupation.

The threat had further intensified. News had reached the religious leaders of this Galilean upstart who according to their sources had the crowds eating out his hand; memorising his every word, reciting them to anyone who would listen in the pubs and the laundrettes. Some even made the ridiculous claim that in meeting this man they had brushed shoulders with God himself. Many were saying that this Jesus was the chosen One; God's true Messiah who would kick-start God's promised revolution. So, when he and his entourage enter the capital on a donkey, just like the prophets foretold, the crowds went wild, stripping branches off trees and red-carpeting the ground with their cloaks... and their hopes and their dreams.

If we had been there that day, what might we have made of all of this? Would our 21st Century cynicism entertain the possibility that this very ordinary man could be the Answer, capital A? Would we have dared to lay our hopes and dreams at his feet?

What do we hope for, I wonder? What dreams do we hold?

Are they still intact or have they been somehow compromised or crushed or set aside?

Very soon the hopes and dreams of this festival crowd would be crushed under the heel of Rome. There would be no uprising; no dramatic divine rescue just a Messiah who couldn't even save himself.

Have we ever felt disappointed with God; let down, deserted?

If so, what were our expectations of him? Did we expect him somehow to champion our cause; quarantine us from pain; parachute in to fix things? I'm not sure he ever makes those kinds of promises.

And what might we have seen if we could have looked into the eyes of Jesus on that carnival day?

Behind the outward smiles and laughter no doubt there lay a maelstrom of emotions, in particular a fear; a terror of what he was walking into. As he received this hero's welcome, he must have known that the next time he would walk these same city streets he would be paraded like an animal; an object of ridicule; a dead man walking.

And as he looked into the cheering faces around him, he must have foreseen how their expectation would so easily turn to disappointment; that even these, his best friends would desert him, disown him, betray him. That inner conflict must have been almost impossible to contain and yet behind those same eyes lay also a compassion stronger than gravity itself.

What lies behind our eyes; the veneer we painstakingly construct, the appearances we so carefully keep up? What do we do with our hopes and dreams, our disappointments and paradoxes; the simultaneous presence of joy and fear, integrity and compromise, life and death?

A few years ago, I did a course on spiritual direction and on one of the sessions we had a speaker from a hospice talking about living with terminal illness. He did an exercise where we wrote on 16 cards the names of beloved people, possessions, roles and hobbies. We were then asked to imagine that we had received the devastating news that our lives were to be cut short; one by one we had to surrender our cards and when we were down to the last most precious few, someone else came and took them one by one. It was a hard and sobering thing to be part of.

The woman beside me refused to be part of it 'I'm not playing' she whispered clinging to her cards, tears rolling down her face; 'this is my life'. Unknown to most, for three years she had lived with this prognosis. And over that time, she had surrendered everything on those cards to God. Only in the last few months had she dared to hold them again.

How do we live with this tension, caught between joy and fear, integrity and compromise, life and death?

The first step is to own our paradoxes; name them and surrender them to the God who from personal experience understands. Before God we can honestly without fear say, this is my life.

We bring this life to the place where the great paradoxes of life are held together and woven into salvation; the place we call the cross

Bishop John Pritchard says that 'On the cross Jesus encountered the darkness head on. He took the full force of it, absorbed the pain that we have spilt all over history. And when he cried those words 'Father forgive them' he took it into the cosmic black hole we call the cross and saw it taken away by his father'

Only then could he reveal the resurrection which has always been lying under the surface of every square inch of life. When Jesus defeated darkness on home ground the glorious possibilities of a world at one with its God start to operate. Only in places, only at times, but the deep engines of a new world are starting to hum'

In the cross and resurrection, a new world begins; a new reality in which all that we despair and despise about ourselves can be transformed little by little. To be human is to be a paradox. We are this curious mixture of the soil of the earth and the divine breath. Our lives will always be caught between who we are and who we would want to be. Today Christ offers to enter our lives in all their glory and squalor and he invites us to follow him because life is always to be found on the other side of death. He asks us to die to the things that demean and belittle us; to surrender our hopes and dreams, our joy and fear, our lives and deaths to the deep engines of a new world; engines we call healing, forgiveness and grace.