

HOPE IN THE LIGHT OF WAR

Luke 13:1-9

Exeter Cathedral

Corrymeela Sunday, 20 March 2022

I am delighted to be with you today, but rather deflated that the times we are in and the Gospel text we are given do not lend themselves to light-heartedness. I suppose Lent was never meant to be jolly. And yet, coming as I do from the Corrymeela Community, I am eager to bring a message of hope not instead of – but in dialogue with the reality of our broken world.

It strikes me that the story of Corrymeela starts with a war in Europe, with a refugee crisis, and with the growing realisation that our world is not divided naturally into good and bad, us and them, but by a brokenness common to each of us, regardless of which side of a conflict we are on. We all carry a desire – born of fear and insecurity – to separate ourselves from those we deem less godly so that we can pretend to be more like God. But to use good old fashioned Lenten language: this is the sin from which must repent, a way of life we must turn from so that we can turn back to God and toward one other.

The Hope of Community

Corrymeela began in the mid-60s, but its origins arose from the experiences of one man from Belfast serving as a chaplain in a prison camp outside Dresden in 1945. Ray Davey had discovered during the war a gift for building community from a diverse collection of people. He began to work not just with fellow prisoners but also his guards, and with refugees who were pouring into Dresden from the Eastern front. Building community with Russians and French, with Poles and Ukrainians – Ray learned about our common humanity, about the fears and hopes we all have. But as he watched the RAF and US Air Force carpet bomb Dresden and its refugee population in retaliation for the Blitz; as he saw the blinding light from the tower of fire rising from a burning city, he realised we are all capable of becoming what we say we are against. Ray returned to Belfast after the war and saw through traumatised eyes the divisions of his own society, the injustices that many were experiencing in an increasingly segregated system. With clarity for what was needed, he started a new community from those who had been separated from each other.

The hope of Corrymeela, the hope of an inclusive Christian community is that we can approach each other not as enemies, but as fellow children of God – that we can create a better sense of *us* when we look to repair our own brokenness rather than label others the problem. Corrymeela has worked to hold spaces where we can overcome stereotypes, where encounters can change us, where our differences are something to celebrate rather than something to fear. As human beings, we will always have conflict; but with God's grace, we can transform discomfort and fear into curiosity. Conflicts can lead to better understanding rather than to harm.

Where is Our Hope Today?

That's the idea. We've never been particularly good at it. And it gets much harder in practice. It gets particularly difficult when someone like Pilate or someone like Putin engages in activities we must oppose. That's what's got me in such a bad mood today. It's this difficult passage from *Luke*, yes. But it's also this god-awful war in Europe. The fact that cities the size of Exeter and Belfast and Dresden are once again being destroyed. This is the largest refugee crisis in Europe since the 40s, and it's only getting worse. We are trying to make sense of the madness. I would want our scripture passage to give us hope.

But. Luke tells us of people who come to Jesus in a traumatised state. The experience they share with him is of a brutal and violent tyrant, Pilate – who has killed innocent people, who has mingled the blood of Galileans with their sacrifices. A horrific image. And troublingly, Jesus does not address the evil of Pilate. He does not condemn the violence these people have seen. Instead, he speaks of his *audience's* need to repent. 'Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.' It makes me wonder if we were to go to Jesus today to tell him about the plight of innocent Ukrainians at the hands of Putin, whether Jesus would ignore the wrongs of this modern day Pilate and instead exhort *us* to repent, lest we meet the same fate as Kyiv. 'Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.' ...What do we do with that? Where is the hope we need to combat the acute evil that is at work in our world?

In the context of such brutality and in the face of such evil, our own brokenness starts to show. Once again we crave and create a binary of good guys and bad guys. It is right to condemn this war and to stand in solidarity with the victims on both sides of the conflict. We need to name the crimes that the Russian regime is committing.

But as we have learned in the retaliatory bombing of Dresden, and in the tribal warfare of Northern Ireland, as we continue to see in our patterns of sectarianism, racism, nationalism, colonialism, misogyny and transphobia – the global system we help create is too often about gaining and maintaining the power to protect ourselves. We too would subject others to what we would call justice. Is the sin of Putin's aggression not the logical end to a broken human system that rewards greed and the skills necessary to play a zero-sum game? Is this imperial impulse on display right now not the norm of human history, and the relative peace and geopolitical stability we have enjoyed for a few decades in Europe not the aberration? The work of peace is constant work because the twisted impulse within humans is a selfish one – born of fear and insecurity. Not to the same degree as Pilate or Putin, but we are all prone to protect our own, to impose our will on others, to demand our preferred version of the truth.

In the Light of War

Make no mistake: a clarity has come these past few weeks in the light of war. There has been an almost apocalyptic unveiling not only of how wrong this invasion is – but how broken we still are. How dependent we have become on cheap and dirty goods despite the moral and ecological costs. How intertwined we have become with oligarchic money. How quick we are to respond to the plight of refugees if they look like us. And also: how interdependent we are on one another – even those to whom we thought we could be indifferent. And also: what strength we find when we are led not by our fears but by our best values. The heroism we unearth when we are willing to make sacrifices to save others. The generosity we garner when we open our borders and homes to those in need. The restraint we show when we resist the impulse to tar the Russian people with the same brush we would use to mark the tyranny of one man.

Amanda Gorman, the American poet, put out a tweet in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. She reminded us that *'There is no such thing as gentle war. There is no peace that can't be flung aside. Our only enemy is that which would make us enemies to each other.'* It is not hard to see in the light of this war that our world is broken. And to return to imagery from the Gospel, this fig tree of ours has yet to produce the fruit it promised – and one worries that its time is up.

But what keeps hope alive is the same truth that Ray Davey caught glimpse of in that prison camp: the good news that there is for us, with God's grace, a different way to live. A life born not of fear but with the assurance that the God of selfless love is with us, with all of us. That ours is a life not of 'might makes right' or an endless extraction of more and more for the most belligerent – but a life of abundance and peace in community. It is still possible.

But unless we repent, we will perish. We too must turn from systems of self-preservation and self-aggrandisement and recognise our glorious interdependence on each other. A flowering late in our season. We too must find the strength and resilience that comes not in deciding who among us is guilty and who is innocent, but in acknowledging the sin that keeps us from standing in solidarity with the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the most vulnerable in our midst: the sin that would make us enemies to each other.

Repent. And have hope even in the light of war. For this is the time for us to bear good fruit.

In the name of the Creator, and the Christ and the Holy Spirit: one God. Amen.