

Pontefract – Walk of Witness

Good Friday – 21 March 2008

Twenty one years ago now I made my first visit to Jerusalem. I was on a course for four weeks and we had a free evening on the eve of the Jewish Sabbath. The Ultra-Orthodox had planned demonstrations against cinemas opening that evening. The secular authorities were determined to contain them in Mear Sharim - that suburb of the city where they live. I decided to go along as a spectator. It was frightening. There were armoured cars. Some twenty minutes in I found myself gasping for breath and with pouring eyes. It was the only time in my life I have been tear-gassed.

It's hard to know how much like that was the event we remember today. The gospels tell of much jeering and later of people spitting, crowning Jesus with thorns and offering him vinegar to drink. It all sounds nasty and very frightening too. However, for sixteen hundred years people have followed the path they believed Jesus took on his way to the cross. Old Jerusalem is as packed with character as it probably was then. There are noisy suks or markets, the smells of delicious spices, the cries of enterprising Palestinian salesmen. Squeezing between all this, with scarcely a day of the year missed out there will be crowds of Christians, often following a wooden cross. They stop at stations along a twisted ally which has its name cut into the stone houses. It is the Via Dolorosa, the pathway or route of sadness.

With a cruel irony Jerusalem repeats the violence and tension within which Jesus died. I returned three weeks ago from Jerusalem and a week later those eight young men were murdered in the Yeshiva, the Rabbinic school. In the week or so before more than 120 men, women and children had died in Gaza – this time Palestinians. Such bloodshed issues from a tit for tat philosophy, from a pattern of constant anger and revenge. Everyone knows what the real answer is but no one (except for one or two real martyrs on each side) has the courage to break the circle of violence.

The rhetoric which surrounded Jesus' passion and death was little different. Take one gospel – I shall quote from Matthew. 'This is the King of the Jews' one authority pinned to the cross. 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Earlier on it was 'Hail, King of the Jews!' spat out at Jesus with contemptuous sarcasm. Earlier on still: 'Let him be crucified!'

What was Jesus' part in the dialogue? He gives no answer in his trial except when Pilate asked him if he is King of the Jews when he replies tacitly: 'You have said so.' This remarkable silence echoes (if silences can echo) Jesus' offering of himself entirely into the hands of the Father. There is no violent response. The most telling think was his one further cry. It was from the cross: 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani?' – 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.' This desolation again echoes Jesus' total self-giving.

Of course, we know the mode of his vindication. Such self-giving was honoured by God. But for today we must live with the darkness and agony. We dare not hurry into an easy resurrection. But might it be that if we, and God's world really lived with the reality of this agony, we might share Jesus' self-offering? Dare we do that? Dare we offer ourselves for the service of others whatever the cost? If we could, might there be some hope that the weeping of the widows of Gaza and Jerusalem might cease? Dare we do anything less?

'O saviour of the world who by thy precious cross and passion has redeemed the world, save us and help us, we humbly beseech thee.'

Amen.