

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Lent, 17th March 2019  
*Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:31-35*  
- *You are my Friends*



As we woke up on Friday, to hear the news about the terrible shootings in the mosques in Christchurch in New Zealand, the New Zealand Prime Minister, Mrs Ardern, made a moving statement about the fact that it seems clear that the 50 people killed were the victims of a racist, Islamophobic terrorist. Mrs Ardern said, ‘Many of those who will have been directly affected by this shooting will be migrants, they will be refugees here. They have chosen to make New Zealand their home and it is their home. They are us.’

A bit later on, a picture appeared on Twitter [reproduced above] of a man who, if I can say this, did not look like a Moslem, but rather like Andy Capp in the cartoons, in a flat cap, standing smiling outside a mosque in Manchester with a placard which said, ‘You are my friends. I will keep watch while you pray.’

Terrible atrocities do sometimes seem to bring out beautiful and uplifting thoughts, like those of Mrs Ardern and of the man in the flat cap outside the mosque in Manchester.

In our Lent study groups we are going through the Beatitudes, the ‘blessed are they’ sayings which Jesus spoke at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.

The second one, perhaps the right one at a time of tragedy, is ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.’ This is one of those short sentences that contains impossibly dense and complicated ideas. On the face of things, for somebody to be mourning, to be sad, to be heartbroken, is not in any sense the same as to be fortunate, which is what the word translated as ‘blessed’ means.

How lucky for you that you are heartbroken; what a wonderful thing it is that you are in floods of tears. Clearly there’s something

which doesn't add up. Try telling the distraught people that were on the TV from New Zealand that they were in some way blessed or fortunate. But really it means, as it says, that those who mourn will be blessed, will be comforted in future: and that is a message of hope after all.

St Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, condemns those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Earlier in the chapter we had as our reading, he identifies the people that he condemns. He says, 'Beware of those dogs and their malpractices. Beware of those who insist on mutilation - I will not call it 'circumcision''. Beware of people who tell you you have to become a Jew in order to become a true Christian.

Nevertheless, Paul was proud to tell everybody that he had been circumcised and that he was an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born and bred, and a Pharisee [Phil. 3:5]. He'd thrown it all over, after his Road-to-Damascus experience, and in his letters, for example to the Galatians and to the Romans, he made the point that, in the kingdom of heaven, there is no difference between Greeks, (Gentiles), and Jews.

The Israelites had been the chosen people of God, and the others, the Gentiles, the 'nations', were the great unwashed. But St Paul's mission was to bring the good news of Jesus precisely to those Gentiles, to those who were not circumcised. He said, 'Our citizenship is in heaven.' Ordinary nationality doesn't apply in heaven.

But originally, Paul - and Jesus - were Jews, sons of Abraham, descendants of Abraham. The word of the Lord came to Abraham and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars; because that's how many your descendants will be.' The sons of Abraham. They were Israelites, the chosen people of God.

The gunman is supposed to have said that one of his reasons for shooting Moslems was because he saw them as strangers, ‘invaders’. At the beginning of this week in morning prayers we were reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, where Moses speaks the words of the Lord, a prophecy about offering sacrifice of the first fruits of the land, the land of milk and honey, which the Israelites have been led into, the promised land. Moses tells them to say in their prayers that they are descended from ‘a wandering Aramean’, or from ‘a Syrian ready to perish’, that they have been led into Egypt and then eventually out of Egypt again, as strangers in the land. Even they, the chosen people, started out as strangers.

There are many passages in the Book of Deuteronomy, and in the Jewish Law generally, which St Paul would have been very familiar with, which impose on Jews a duty to care for a stranger that is within their gates, to care for strangers along with orphans and widows. That is the spirit that Mrs Ardern has so eloquently reminded us of. It is not a spirit of antipathy towards immigrants and refugees, not against strangers, not against people who are different from ourselves.

This is such a difficult area. There are so many apparent paradoxes. The Jews, refugees, made it to the promised land; they went to the holy city, Jerusalem, and set up the temple there. ‘Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest’.

But Jesus points out that, because that is where the council, the Sanhedrin, is based, it is only in Jerusalem that he can be condemned, and that Jerusalem is a city that kills prophets, that throws stones at people who are sent to it.

Mrs Ardern was one of those world leaders, like Mrs Merkel in Germany, who has dared to extend a welcome to refugees. She

still extends that welcome. But what about us? The challenge to us today is surely not to be fixated with 'taking back control', with restricting immigration and upholding national identity, however important some of those things might seem to be at first.

Jesus said, 'Strive to enter in at the strait gate. Struggle to get in through the narrow door. For I tell you that many will try to enter and not be able to. You may stand outside and knock: say, 'Sir, let us in.' But he will only answer, 'I do not know where you come from.' [Luke 13:24]

Where do we come from? You could say that Jesus makes getting into the kingdom of heaven seem like a refugee trying to come ashore in Italy, or trying to get through at the Hungarian border or even being caught up in our own Government's 'hostile environment' at Heathrow today. Contrast that with what Mrs Ardern said. ' ... They will be refugees here. They have chosen to make New Zealand their home. It is their home. They are us.'

The challenge for us as Christians is to raise our sights above the earthly ghastliness which stems from narrow nationalism, and to seek what is truly heavenly. 'Blessed are those who mourn, because they will be comforted.' Let us pray that, with God's help, we can become channels of peace, so that we too can say that they are our friends, and that we will keep watch while they pray.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant