

**5<sup>th</sup> March 2017**

**Lent 1: The Passion of Jesus**

**Matthew 21.12-22; 28-32**

There was a fiasco at the Oscars last weekend. Movie Stars of yesteryear, Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway announced the wrong best picture winner, reading out *La La Land* before correctly giving the award to *Moonlight*. *Moonlight* is a film about a black man who grows up to realise that he is gay. *La La Land* is a feel-good movie about a white couple dancing along to jazz music.

After last year's controversy that the Oscars were too white after no black actors were nominated, Stephen Colbert on the Late Late Show joked, "There's always a catch," "Here's your Oscar, but some white folks get to touch it first. To make matters worse, while they were up on stage Ryan Gosling had to explain jazz to them."

Apparently there was a Text from David Cameron: "Any chance the Brexit decision envelope was handed to you by the same people who run the [#Oscars](#)?"

As we start Lent and journey towards the cross we will ask the question not who is the true Oscar winner, but who is the true Lord.

IN Jesus day Romans citizens had to acclaim Caesar as Lord. Christians would make their stand against this, often to the point of death, by proclaiming Jesus as the true Lord of all. As we journey through Lent we will discover the reasons for this.

Many years ago a film came out the *Passion of Christ* directed by Mel Gibson, who was also up for best director Oscar for *Hacksaw Ridge* last weekend. He didn't get it. The movie was controversial and disclosed a division among contemporary Christians. Millions of Christians welcomed it enthusiastically and proclaimed it to have great potential for evangelism. Many were moved by its graphic portrayal of how much suffering Jesus experienced 'for us' in his last week on earth. Other Christians were disturbed by it –by its portrayal of the Jews and by its message that all of us were or are responsible for the death of Jesus: that Jesus had to experience all of this because of us.

The movie also reinforced the widespread but much too narrow understating of the passion of Jesus. Passion is from the Latin word *passio* meaning suffering.

But in everyday English we also use ‘passion’ for any consuming interest, dedicated enthusiasm, or concentrated commitment. In this sense, a person’s passion is what she or he is passionate about.

As we journey through Lent I shall reflecting on both these meanings together. We shall be reading through the chapters of Matthew’s gospel that describe the last week of Jesus in Jerusalem from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. We will see how Jesus was passionate about the kingdom of God, namely to bring God’s justice for all and change his society and the world. But that led to his suffering at the hands of Roman justice. We will look this Lent at what Jesus was passionate about as a way to understand why his life ended in the passion of Good Friday.

I don’t know what you are passionate about? Where do you put your enthusiasm? Is there something in your life you’d like to change? You could be married or single, have children, have a job or be seeking one. Do you ever catch yourself wishing your partner was more fun to be with, or perhaps slimmer or sexier? If you have children do you wish they were more academic, more reliable, more into church? Would you like to change your job? In a perfect world whose door on your street would you like to see the removal van turn up at to say goodbye to an annoying neighbour?

Mahatma Ghandi said ‘we must become the change we want to see in others’. Real change is never successfully imposed from without but must be inspired from within. Barak Obama said ‘change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek’.

I know someone<sup>i</sup> whose friend is a politician and he said when he was first elected he was very keen to impress his constituents with his commitment to his locality and his constituency in bringing about change. But he found one constituent particularly difficult to please. The man would write in each month complaining about the state of the small patch of grass outside his front boundary wall. It was full of weeds and he demanded that the council did something about it. The politician did his best to do something about it but a combination of him being new boy on the block and the minor nature of the request meant the council never did anything. One Saturday morning after another angry letter from the constituent, the politician turned up at his door and asked him to accompany him outside into the street. The patch of grass had been weeded to perfection. The constituent told him he was a brilliant politician but how had he managed to get the council to get off their backsides. The politician replied ‘He didn’t. He did it himself that morning. It took about

twenty minutes. The man was incandescent with rage probably because he was shamed into realising that he could have easily brought about the change he so desperately wanted.

Change always has to start with each one of us.

You can change your partner, your job, and your friends. Little bit more difficult with your kids! But first you may want to try changing yourself. There are no guarantees but a change of attitude, and reaction – perhaps more appreciation to your partner, more affection, tell your friends you value them, start saying good morning to the neighbour – you never know you may have begun change in the world.

Jesus brought change with great passion. He was the change he wanted to see in the world. On that first Palm Sunday he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey a symbol of peace in contrast to Pilate and the Romans who would have ridden into Jerusalem with a show of power and violence. By the end of that Palm Sunday Jesus was turning over the tables on the Temple, symbolically saying that things in society and in religion had to change. The tables needed turning in favour of the poor and those excluded and discriminated against. This conflict would lead to his death on Good Friday.

The conflict of the final week takes place in Jerusalem. It's a city where in November a group of 20 of us visited on our Holy Land Pilgrimage. Now as then it was a city that was tense with rival factions and contested holy sites. Today the old temple mount and the western wall, what is left of the temple from Jesus day, is the holiest place for Jews. The temple mount now has a Muslim mosque on top, the Dome of the Rock and Al asqua mosque and the stand-off between religious Jews and Muslims is tense.

2000 years ago Jesus walks into the temple area and turns over the tables in a fit of anger and drives out the moneychangers. He says "My house will be called a house of prayer," but you are making it "a den of robbers."

So meek and mild, gentle Jesus, floating along in his blonde hair and nightie is getting angry and passionate.

What is going on here?

Jerusalem was the focus for political, economic and spiritual oppression. Jesus had come to bring change because the system wasn't working. The tables needed turning.

Jerusalem was a centre of political oppression where the many were ruled by the few, the powerful and the wealthy

elites; the monarchy, nobility, aristocracy. Ordinary people had no voice in the shaping of the society.

There was economic exploitation. A high percentage of the society's wealth, which came originally from agricultural production, went into the coffers of the wealthy and powerful – between one half to two thirds of it.

How did they manage this? By the way the system was fixed up through the structures and laws about land ownership, taxation and labour and so on. Jewish law said that agricultural land could not be bought or sold. The reason for this was to ensure that every family had its own plot of land in perpetuity and therefore were able to make a living. But land could be confiscated by the King and it could be confiscated as a result of debt because land could be used as collateral for a loan, which if not repaid then the land would be confiscated. A lot of the parables of Jesus involved the land and tenant farmers, who had lost their land and therefore been forced to try and earn a living through day labour or begging. Peasant displacement from their land was a big issue in first century Palestine just like property and house prices is a big issue in our society.

Jerusalem was the home for most of the large landowners and their wealth. The Jerusalem elites lived in luxury. But they had a difficult task. They tread a fine line. Their primary obligation was to Rome and they had to pay an imperial tax. They were also to maintain domestic peace and order. Rome did not want a rebellion and if there was one their own position and wealth was threatened. It was a delicate balancing act. They need to collaborate enough with Rome to keep Rome happy, but not so much as to anger their fellow Jewish subjects.

The religious system justified it all by telling the people that the King ruled by divine right and the social order reflected the will of God and the powers that be were ordained by God.

The Temple in Jerusalem was the centre of it all. According to the Jews this was literally where heaven met earth. They believed that Israel literally was at the centre of creation. The temple was good for business as people had to make pilgrimage there to have their sins forgiven. When Jesus stated forgiving people on the hillsides of Galilee, in their own houses, out on the streets, it was as though total anarchy had broken out. His actions mounted to nothing less than a massive threat to the entire religious, political and social fabric of Israel and to the establishment. Jesus was bypassing the entire temple

system. He was announcing it redundant, irrelevant and obsolete. With each act of forgiveness he was declaring war on this religious system. Now in turning over the tables in the temple itself he was taking on the whole system head to head.

The moneychangers exchanged normal currency of special temple money to buy sacrifices in order to obtain forgiveness. Jesus said they were a den of robbers implying that they were cheating normal people in the exchange rate, exploiting and taking advantage of people they were supposed to be helping. They used the temple to justify and perpetuate their pocket lining practices. They also dared to put a price on forgiveness when God always intended it to be free.

*The temple is not just a place where the robbery occurs but the place where the robbers go for refuge. There is an ancient prophetic tradition in which God insisted not just on justice and worship, but on justice over worship. God through the prophets had repeatedly said 'I reject your worship because of your lack of justice', but never, ever, ever, 'I reject your justice because of your lack of worship' (Hosea 6.6; Micah 6.6-8; Amos 5.21-24; Isaiah 1.11-17.*

Instead of it being a house of prayer for all nations it had now become a symbol of Jewish exclusiveness and discrimination – and as such it had to go!

One of the issues of justice was that blind and lame people were banned from entering the temple. It goes back to the time that King David captured Jerusalem and made it his capital. The enemy Jebusites who were defend the mountain believed it was so secure that the blind and lame could defend it but David captured it though its water supply. But he made a rule that no blind or lame person was welcome there so there would be no reminders of the mocking of the enemy. You can read the story in 2 Samuel 5.

Matthew is the only gospel that mentions this small yet significant detail that after the overthrowing of the money changers tables Jesus finishes off the cleansing of the temple by healing the blind and the lame, the people who had been kept out were now welcomed in. the people who had been scorned were now healed. It was an action full of significance for the kingdom of God.

The next day in what seems like another petulant action Jesus curses a fig tree and says it will be barren forever. Which is exactly what he was doing with the temple – it

was so corrupt and far from the kingdom of God that it was useless. The promise to the disciples which follows is not a general comment about the power of prayer to do extraordinary things (though of course it is true that all sorts of things can be accomplished by prayer). The promise is far more focused than that. Saying to this mountain that it should be lifted up and thrown into the sea when you are standing next to the Temple mountain, was bound to be taken as another coded warning about the Temple as God's judgement fell upon his rebellious people.

When we look at our own world we may ponder and reflect on where Jesus would put his judgement today. Which intuitions have become corrupt, so that they serve the opposite purpose from which they were set up? They become self-serving. Where do we see churches that by their attitudes and rituals actually prevent people from worshipping God? Those churches that rob people of their lives through abuse or manipulation. Where do we exclude or discriminate? Where do we need change: in our lives, in our churches, in our society?

Because Jesus comes and turns over tables. Jesus comes to bring change so the kingdom of God may come near. Through faith, even mountains can move.

*The Pharisees' question Jesus authority to do these things. They are dying to ask him 'who do you think you are? Are you the Messiah? Jesus tells them a short parable about two sons one of whom says 'no' to his father but then did what had been asked of him, the other of whom said 'yes' but then didn't do it.*

*The first son who rudely tells his father he doesn't feel like working today, but then does after all, stands for the tax collectors and the prostitutes. Their daily life seemed like saying 'No' to God; but when they heard Jesus they changed their lifestyle (in other words they repented). The second son who politely tells his father he will indeed go to work, but then doesn't, stands for the Temple hierarchy and other religious leaders. They look as if they are doing God's will, worshipping in the Temple and keeping up appearances but they refuse to hear the message of repentance and recognise the Messiah in their midst and are not changing their ways of working for the kingdom of God.*

*The challenge for us is partly this: make sure we are responding to Jesus, allowing him to confront at any point where we have been like the second son and said 'yes' to God while in fact going off in another direction. What should the followers of Jesus be doing today that would challenge the powers of the present world with the news*

*that he is need the rightful Lord? What should we be doing that would make people ask, 'By what right are you doing that?'*

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<sup>i</sup> R. Parsons, *The Wisdom House*, Hodder, 2014, Ch 8