

# *saving jerusalem*

a sermon preached on the

## *Third Sunday in Lent*

28 February 2016

at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63:1-9, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:31-35

The Pharisees appear on first spec to be friendly towards Jesus: warning him of a lethal threat, giving him protective advice.<sup>1</sup> Does Jesus' response to them suggest that he is grateful for their protection?<sup>2</sup> Perhaps. Though it seems more likely – given the extensive and well-known record of his fierce disputes with religious leaders – that he is well aware that it's not only Herod who has lethal intent towards him. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets".<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is hardly the only reformer in human history to attract the lethal intent of the religious establishment. Indeed, anyone can see that lethal intent appears to be the standard reaction to reform and renewal. Who could count the number of reformers that have been silenced, brutalised, persecuted, and killed by Church leaders, in the name of 'orthodoxy'? The behaviour of opponents to the ordination of women in the Anglican Communion is a chilling reminder of this religious violence. The way in which the Anglican Communion is presently behaving around issues of homosexuality calls to mind Jesus' teaching about the nexus between murderous intent and murder:<sup>4</sup> for even the thought that homosexuality is a 'disordered' state carries the seeds of an unacknowledged murderous wish.

Listen to that word 'disordered': it implies that the restoration of 'order' necessitates the removal of that which is imagined to be out of order. There's a terrible violence there, according to which the perceived 'purity' of religion is to be accomplished by expelling what is regarded as impure. This is the age-old murderous intent of the puritan power-drive. This is what we witness with Islamic State. And yes, it is always about power. The puritan self is in fact weak and insecure: and imagines that it can shore up its insecure position by means of power, by killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to it.

But the way of salvation is inevitably costly. It is a 'narrow door' – as our Lord teaches his disciples just a few verses earlier in chapter 13.<sup>5</sup> "Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last".<sup>6</sup> It's always remarkable that people who supposedly know their Bibles so readily ignore this crucial gospel teaching of a topsy-turvy good news that those who imagine themselves to be 'in' may not be, and those who have been told they're outsiders are already welcomed at the banquet. There is no escaping the price that must be paid for the great salvific work that can only be 'accomplished on the third day'.<sup>7</sup>

The miracle of Jesus is the witness of one who accepts this inevitable and necessary price – and who does so with the love of a mother hen who desires to gather her chickens under her wings!<sup>8</sup> This is the astonishing *evangelion*: Jesus shows that it is possible to love even those who will react and respond with puritanical murderous intent! Lent is leading us inexorably down the narrow path of this astonishing *evangelion*.

To clarify: it's not so much the capacity to accept the necessary price, which any stiff-upper-lip stoic could accomplish, but to do so as an act of pure love. And when this pure love is revealed we will cry out with ecstatic joy: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"<sup>9</sup> At the heart of every Thanksgiving Prayer that is exactly what we do in fact cry out:

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1 Luke 13:31  
2 Luke 13:32  
3 Luke 13:34  
4 Matthew 5:21-22  
5 Luke 13:24  
6 Luke 13:30  
7 Luke 13:32  
8 Luke 13:34  
9 Luke 13:35

because in this action we have caught a glimpse of the impossibility of the Love which overcomes puritanical power abuse and murder.

All that remains, then, is to remind ourselves that everything I have said here is about *us*: about every human person's calling to become fully human, to become truly daughters and sons of God; those who drink from the same spiritual rock;<sup>10</sup> whose hearts and flesh cry out for the same infinite Love.<sup>11</sup>

That's because every one of us is called, uniquely, to be the means of the revealing of Love. In the pattern of today's story we are to see the story of ourselves, and our own narrow door to salvation. Life has appointed each of us to embody some particular aspect of the revelation of love. In the company of the One who goes before us, each of us has a particular 'work' to do, which can only be accomplished on 'the third day'.

Oh yes, there will be offers of supposed-protection, from puny aggressors and power-obsessed puritans, to preserve us from paying what is in fact the necessary price. But we are invited to choose to walk in the same way as our Lord: to accept that the Jerusalem to which we are uniquely sent is entrapped in its own murderous intent; and can only be saved by the miracle of our love towards that which always kills the prophets.

So let us pray that our Lenten pilgrimage may strengthen us to embrace even murderous intent, in the manner of Jesus the broody mother hen, as lovers! And let us pray that – each of us accepting and embracing the 'work' we have been sent to do – the whole Church may also be saved from its lethal puritanism, and come to cry out with ecstatic joy "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:4

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 63:1