

Nation shall rise against Nation

The Gospel reading describes in very clear terms, the events that would surround the fall of Jerusalem. The people had been living in awful conditions under Roman rule. They felt themselves utterly oppressed, and many of them longed for the time when a great leader would re-ignite the nation's devotion to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and lead God's holy people in a revolt that would establish the Kingdom of God.

This leader would be a holy man, an anointed man – the Messiah, the Christ. The Christ's job was a thoroughly human job – never any expectation that it would be a divine figure. The Christ had a job to do – and that job was to establish God's kingdom.

But of course, when Jesus arrives, he tells everyone that the kingdom has come – but it's not what you were expecting ! The Gospel reading this morning, tells of Jesus entering Jerusalem for the big show down with the forces of evil. But then he does something that confuses everyone. He talks about the temple being destroyed ! Well, hold on a minute – the temple is the great symbol of the Kingdom of God, it is the place where heaven touches earth ! You can't be the messiah, the Christ and yet slate the temple.

So Jesus explains – that those Messiahs, those Christs, and there were at least several of them – that went out into the desert to form resistance movements, were false Christs. The kingdom of God does not come about by military action. Jesus is offering a different way of being Israel. A way that, shying away from military action, sounded a bit wishy washy, liberal, semi-committed. But actually, this was the way of the cross, where you entire life is demanded of you.

Jesus looks at the aspirations of a nation and condemns it, and describes in stark terms the inevitable outcome of the hopes of his contemporaries – the city being rased to the ground and the people being divided and scattered. But Jesus calls the nation to repent, not simply to say sorry for this or that particular sin. Repentance is a total reversal of direction – and here the nation is running headlong into a catastrophe.

Repentance

When Jesus calls for repentance, this is the context. Repentance is a political act, it is never merely saying sorry. This week's Baptist Union Council was largely taken up with the question of whether we, as a Union, should offer an apology to the Jamaican Baptist Union, for the slave trade from which we have benefitted.

This was always going to be controversial. I have three boys, and there are frequent conflicts among them. And trying to get them to apologise to each other, is lik

And part of the debate meant looking at the language that we use. There are several words in fact, that appear in Scripture and which come to mind – repentance, apology, confession. And they are all quite different.

Confession is almost simply an acknowledgement – it means quite literally, saying the same thing, saying it how it is. Sometimes we confess our sins, sometimes we confess the Greatness of God.

Then there is the apology, which is usually something heart-felt, where we feel the pain. Now it is difficult for us to feel guilty about situations that are beyond our control. But that is why I was one of several who argued that apology must come within the context of repentance.

Repentance is a change in our way of life, and this has a communal dimension. During the summer, Ken Livingstone made an apology. "You can look across there to see the institutions that still have the benefit of the wealth they created from slavery," he said pointing towards the financial district. He claimed that London was still tainted by the horrors of slavery.

As Baptists, we represent a country, and benefit from a system, that has made us comfortable at the expense of others – and others have suffered for the sake of the comforts we take for granted. And an act of repentance commits us to work for a world in which these injustices are not tolerated. And it is within that context, that we can offer the heart-felt apologies that are asked of us. And so the Baptist Union Council offered the following statement.

It was a difficult statement to put together, and the process of making it embraced a lot of diversing and conflicting views. But it is not merely words – when it come to making an apology, talk is cheap. But here, we commit ourselves as a union, to seek the Kingdom of God, to feel the injustice of others – and to work hard today as heralds of true justice.

'As a Council we have listened to one another, we have heard the pain of hurting sisters and brothers, and we have heard God speaking to us. In a spirit of weakness, humility and vulnerability, we acknowledge that we are only at the start of a journey, but we are agreed that this must not prevent us speaking and acting at a kairos moment.

Therefore, we acknowledge our share in and benefit from our nation's participation in the transatlantic slave trade. We acknowledge that we speak as those who have shared in and suffered from the legacy of slavery, and its appalling consequences for God's world. We offer our apology to God and to our brothers and sisters for all that has created and still perpetuates the hurt which originated from the horror of slavery

We repent of the hurt we have caused the divisions we have created, our reluctance to face up to the sin of the past, our unwillingness to listen to the pain of our black sisters and brothers, and our silence in the face of racism and injustice today. We commit ourselves, in a true spirit of repentance, to take what we have learned from God in the Council and to share it widely in our Baptist community and beyond, looking for gospel ways by which we can turn the words and feelings we have expressed today into concrete actions and contribute to the prophetic work of God's coming Kingdom.'