

God's Broken Covenant

So the streets of the city are packed with people in anticipation of what is about to take place. The salvation of the world depends upon what will happen in the next few hours, and people have turned up to cry out for justice, to demand freedom. The power games of international significance are about to be played out. Everyone is present, the die is cast. What is going to be the result. Will the people in the city see the justice for which they call, or will they witness yet another disappointment, one more empty promise, one more failure to turn the tide of history?

Whether we are talking about the G20 summit in the City of London this week, or the arrival of the Messiah in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, the result is one of disappointment. Protesters in London will probably view the celebrated results of the G20 summit, as a missed opportunity. The basic structures that precipitated the global economic disaster are carefully defended, but a little juggling with numbers and some rhetorical gestures to give the appearance that justice has been done. No monumental break through. No desire for the radical reformation of the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. Still little hope for the world's poorest people. Plenty of disappointment amongst those who campaigned for justice in London this week.

If we are talking about Jerusalem, the disappointment would be far greater. Jerusalem's economy has gone up the wall. The poorest people still trampled upon by the powerful. God's covenant with this people has not been honoured. The people are hardly blessed – the promised land is no longer theirs, poverty and injustice and exploitation are the norm. And in comes Israel's Messiah, Israel's true hope – God's own means of honouring the covenant. He enters the capital, to meet massive expectation of the radical restructuring of power in the city. But as the Messiah enters, he just pops his head in the temple, has a quick nose around. And then he clears off! Nothing! Is that it? Is he not going to do anything? The cries of Hosannah, the cry for justice and freedom, seems to have been ignored. How would you feel, if you'd been one of those people crying Hosannah, and the liberator arrives, parks his donkey, pokes his head into the temple and then goes and books into a B & B?

I would love to see what happened the palm branches after Jesus had cleared off. Those who had waved their palm branches in hope of the liberation, in the hope that this Messiah was going to come and defeat the Romans, would have been confused to say the least. Did they frown at each other in confusion. Here he comes, here he comes ... oh, there he goes. How do you feel if that's you? And you and your family are just left still stood there with your palm branches?

Was there, somewhere in Jerusalem, a pile of palm branches thrown down like discarded placards by disappointed protestors? Oh well, this was not the Messiah after all. This is not how God's anointed liberator enters Jerusalem. This is probably why, in Mark's Gospel, after this the only supporters that Jesus seems to have are his own disciples.

But we know the story of Easter week. It would not be long before the Messiah's own disciples would start to abandon him. And eventually, of course, this Messiah ends up on a cross. Executed, no one is quite sure why. And for those who believed this Jesus to be God's Messiah, for those who had committed their lives to following him, for those who believed this Jesus to be God's means of honouring the covenant – the death of Jesus was more than

tragic. For the followers of Jesus, his crucifixion said one thing. That God's covenant was broken. God's covenant was broken. That's the end of the story.

Not just the end of the story for this great leader whose martyrdom would be celebrated throughout human history. Not just the end of the adventure with this charismatic prophet from Nazareth. But this is the end of God's dealings with his people. Justice has not been done. Freedom has not come. The Messiah, the one anointed to fulfil God's covenant is dead. And the covenant has died with him. God has not fulfilled the covenant, he has not stayed true to the promises written on the hearts of his people. Not a bad day, but the dawn of a new dark age. It's the end of the story.

For many people, that is where the G20 summits leave us. And talk of a new dark age is not necessarily a gloomy fantasy for the terminally pessimistic. I'm no economist, but it seems to me that simply tinkering with a global finance system that requires radical restructuring, is only going to lead to the crisis getting far worse. But who knows ... it is an unpredictable game, but as far as re-writing the rules to create something that is fair for the poorer nations of our world, is now an impossibility. If that's what you want, you may as well throw your placard down on that pile of palm branches in Jerusalem.

Increasingly, talk of averting the ecological disasters that this century holds in store, sounds like the story has ended. More scientists are now coming out to say that it is already too late to prevent runaway climate chaos that will devastate life on this planet. The half-baked promises that aren't ever honoured by western governments look increasingly futile. And some leading environmental campaigners have given up hope. It's the end of the story. Not just a bad day, but the dawn of a new dark age. Throw your palm branch on the pile!

There are those of us who have campaigned for justice for homeless people. And we witness in the recent debate here, the futility of expecting central government to change its policy. The strength of institutional resolve to relativise the churches' call for a just way of dealing with people. Time to throw our palm branch on the pile?

But for many people, there are more pressing problems. More immediate concerns. Their homes have been repossessed. Their jobs have gone. And their self-esteem has evaporated. And God did nothing to stop it! Throw your palm branch on the pile.

And there are people whose personal lives, who for one reason or another are gripped with miseries that can't be changed. Plagued by grief that is too hard to bear. Tainted with loss that has become permanent. And God might help, and God might help you to feel better. But nothing has happened. And while you still come to church and sing songs and pray prayers, you know that – actually – you threw your palm branch on the pile a long time ago.

Isaiah

But then, there is this reading from Isaiah. A prophetic text from the sixth century before Christ. Israel is personified in a single figure – the Servant. And the servant is living in exile, the servant, enduring the punishment of Israel's sin. The Servant is the one who is suffering the wrath of God, suffering the punishment that was part of the covenant. But one who willingly suffers the punishment for his unfaithfulness. Suffering it, because in the midst of this impossible situation, he knows, somehow, that God is with him. He knows, some how, that this is not an endless dark age, that this is not the end of the story, the Servant who

knows, somehow, that he is not condemned. Somehow, this story is not finished. Somehow, the Servant knows that God has not abandoned him, and has not abandoned his cause. Somehow, hope has not been abandoned.

I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore I have set my face like flint, and know that I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near...

This is a text that comes from a dark age, from an exile who knew that this exile was God's punishment, and that this exile would outlast his life. And still there is the knowledge that the story is not yet finished, nor has the struggle come to an end.

Over the last year, we as a church have engaged various agencies as we have sought fairness in the way that homeless people in our city are being treated. And in many ways, it came to a head when some of us realised that with the government target of zero rough sleepers, it is going to be impossible to maintain any meaningful level of fairness in the way that homeless people are treated. And having met with some of the people who wrote those reports, who demand simply that organisations like ours fit into their plan or stop complaining, it feels like – by and large the story is over. But maybe it isn't. So far – people in Xchange seem to have been at the forefront of our work with homeless people. But it looks as though the time has come to throw our full weight into large scale campaign against central government. We are not quite sure what that might mean, what form it might take or how it might work. But I do want to say at this stage, that anyone who would like to be involved with this, at any level – could you try and get hold of me in the next couple of weeks. Because – whilst changing government policy is impossible - we get the sense that this story is far from over.

We celebrate communion shortly, the belief that God has honoured his covenant – and that God will honour his covenant. In our personal lives, in our political lives. If we take this meal seriously, then at times we shudder at the cost of the covenant. We shudder at the sacrifice that this way of life requires of us, because we follow this Jesus on his way to the cross. That is where God's covenant leads us. And it's dark, and its painful and its horrible. But – at this meal, we celebrate the fact that our walk with God does not end at the cross, we realise that the palm branches we discarded were never going to bring the freedom for which we longed, we invest our hope in the God who has promised to honour the covenant he has made with us.