



The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity
13 September 2015

Who do you say that I am?

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Reading: Isaiah 50.4-9a; James 3.1-12; Mark 8.27-end

Whatever your political persuasion, few could deny that something seismic happened in the political life of our country yesterday. Jeremy Corbyn who apparently was reluctantly persuaded to run for the leadership of the Labour Party, and began his campaign as a 200/1 rank outsider, yesterday took 59.5% of the vote, 40% more than his nearest contender. Whether you love him, fear him, think he is a throw-back to the past, or simply that he is unelectable - it is impossible not to be astonished by the nature of his success. Here is a politician who has never courted celebrity status, who while being an outspoken protester has never been groomed for power by the party, he got two Es for his A levels, is a t'total vegetarian and looks like a cross between your favourite elderly geography teacher and Roger Shaljean. If you want to find out more about him you can go for a chat with him at Gaby's on Charing Cross Road, his favourite restaurant run by an Iraqi Jewish refugee. So what is it about this man that has had young people joining the party in droves and who has been packing out halls for his talks around the country which one young voter said to me were better than a Bon Jovi concert - and the queue to get in longer too? What is it that all the consummate experience and professional skills of his rivals found so hard to challenge? I think most people would agree that it was his authenticity. An authenticity which few could doubt if you heard him speak at the "Refugees are Welcome Rally" yesterday. There was no spin, no PR, no communications or press officer to guide or massage his message, no desire to keep a hostile press onside or placate those who disagreed with him. He simply spoke what he believed - and there was no mistaking it. Impossible, naïve, idealistic, retrograde or revolutionary perhaps, but real. There was a directness, no mismatch between the message and the man and all he hoped for. And somehow his words had the power to connect with a deep longing within for a greater moral fibre, a greater decency, a greater truthfulness, a fairer nation. Call us naïve too but that's how it felt:

It the rally in Parliament Square he said:

"Surely, surely, surely, our objective ought to be to find peaceful solutions to the problems of this world, to spend our resources on helping people, not hindering people and to try and bring about that world of decency, humans rights and justice."

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks in today's Gospel, the fact is that often we don't know. We don't know who people are or what they will become. More and more in the life of the nation we have learnt to be suspicious. We have grown cynical. Ideas may sound good but how much are they going to cost us? How much will they impact upon our own lives and our own self-interest? How many of us would give up our homes, or well-being, or want our neighbourhoods to become refugee camps for the poor? It's hard enough being delayed for our summer holidays through the Channel Tunnel. Like those disciples of Christ, we may have those moments of revelation - see the meaning of God's kingdom in a flash of divine inspiration, but then how often we retreat. Retreat just as Peter retreated back into that old sense of desiring to possess and contain the privilege of God's kingdom for ourselves. Peter recognises Jesus as the Messiah - the liberator but when Jesus talks about the cost of that kingdom and that he the Son of Man must undergo suffering, and be rejected and die - well Peter cannot accept that and rebukes Jesus. Jesus' following words are shocking, he says to Peter, "Get behind me Satan, because you are setting your mind not on divine things but human things." It has always seemed quite an over the top attack on Peter to me. After all Peter is only trying to argue that Jesus shouldn't have to suffer for what he believes. But that's just the

thing, that's just the temptation - a happy suffering-free life - Jesus does have to suffer - there is no suffering-immune kingdom to escape to. The kingdom, if it is to come, must be built in the crucible of our own sinful world. It will need struggle and integrity, it will need perseverance in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds. It will need faith in God through mockery, trial and rejection - it will need Christ to transform the agony of a cross into resurrection.

What is Christ saying? He is saying that if you really want to become his followers you actually have to take up his cross and follow, you actually have to put your life where your mouth is. You actually have to preach the kingdom and say it with your life. This is not some tokenistic faith. This is not about courting celebrity, or sitting at the high table, this is not about gestures of compassion, or the theory of Christianity - it's about living your love for God and your love for your neighbour as if your life depends upon it. It does. It's about a new humanity that costs nothing less than everything.

There are times in our lives when all of us come face to face with the nature of our own mortality and suddenly life is not anymore about self-advancement, or success or position, or prestige, but whether we can actually live with integrity. There are moments in history that define us and define our nation. Like Captain Oats walking off into the snow, "I am just going out, I may be some time..." - acts which give others the chance of survival; events like Dunkirk and the victory of the underdog, or people like Edith Cavell, or providing sanctuary for those fleeing Nazi persecution. But there are also shameful moments when we look away or walk past on the other side of the road. Syria is like that at the moment. It shames us because we know we have looked away and that looking away is the result and also the cause of our feelings of powerlessness. In 2012 we held the memorial of a brilliant journalist in this church called Marie Colvin. She died on February 20 2012 in the Baba Amr district of Homs when the house she was reporting from was targeted and hit by Syrian government forces besieging the area. Marie had run to get her shoes which she had taken off when entering the house. She was killed in the blast. It always struck me as a remarkable act of cultural respect that she had taken off her shoes, like entering holy ground, in the middle of a war zone. In her last report from Syria before she was killed she had written:

On the lips of everyone was the question, Why have we been abandoned by the world? Ban Ki Moon, the Secretary General of the United Nations said last week: 'We see neighbourhoods shelled indiscriminately, hospitals used as torture centres, children as young as 10 years old killed and abused. We see almost certainly crimes against humanity.' Yet the international community has not come to the aid of the innocent caught in this hell. The kids are screaming all the time, a mother, whose 16 year old son had been shot by a sniper while searching for bread said: 'We feel so abandoned. They've given Bashar al-Assad the green light to kill us.'

Like Peter too much suffering is hard to bear, so we deny it and turn away. But sometimes we cannot turn away. We must see death before we can know resurrection. Two weeks ago the image of a Syrian child washed up on a beach branded itself upon our minds and the horror we had turned away from entered into the psyche of our nation. There is something about this little three year old Syrian boy on the beach with his red t-shirt riding up and his blue shorts and training shoes with his face in the sand, that humanises a story that we have heard in countless other reports of tragedy. Perhaps it is the way the way he lies there like a child we have seen curled up in a cot. But here the sea is lapping over him. Perhaps it is how small he is, so vulnerable, so innocent. Perhaps we imagine how his parents got him dressed for the journey in the boat - laced up his training shoes for him before they set off in the night. Or is it the tall official looking down with his orange fluorescent topped jacket and black boots upon little child dead in the sand. The official onlooker who cannot reverse the tragedy; in the next picture picking the child up both in compassion but also in horror, his head turned away as though he doesn't want to look into the face of this child he is holding in his hands who could have been his own son or any one of our children.

The picture humanises a tragedy that we have done our best to dehumanise and turn away from – this death “can never be” we say like Peter. We do not want to see the children suffer – it’s marauding migrants, it’s those swarms threatening to flood our country and come through the tunnel like rats along the pipes. Surely not an innocent child of God such as this? But this dead child speaks and says: “Here is where your wars and your violence, your turning away has led - it is you who have done this.”

But there is another story unfolding. A story beyond the suffering and beyond the pain. The image of Germans coming out to clap and cheer refugees from Syria arriving. And the Mayor of Munich when asked if he could cope answering simply, “Of course we will cope, we have to cope, we have to cope because they are human beings.” It is as though they are reversing history. Germany the nation who in the Second World War we remember for sending so many to their deaths along railway lines is now the country of return, the place of refuge and salvation. The train lines are now the lines of hope. Germany is redeeming history. The place of suffering has become the place offering resurrection and new life.

Is that not our Christian story? And can’t we do the same? Can’t we too become a story of integrity and compassion? I believe we can and so do many others. Some of these people flooded Hyde Park in their 1000s yesterday - a diverse people of all colours and ages and ethnic origins, including a group from this church, more than 40,000 people walking down the streets of Whitehall with our placards, which read “Refugees are Welcome Here.” We believe that resurrection is possible and from the suffering that we have turned away from for too long there can come a conversion of the heart. A little boy standing on the corner of the street with a painted umbrella speaks for our nation - “Refugees didn’t come here for the weather,” the umbrella reads – “they need a home.”

Jeremy Corbyn addressing the rally said:

“Let us be a force for change in the world, a force for humanity in the world, a force for peace in the world and a force that recognises we cannot go on like this, with grotesque levels of inequality. We are one world.”