

## Luke 13.31-35

16<sup>th</sup> March 2025

Psalm 27

### Faith – both private and public

I was chatting to a minister friend of mine the other day and he told me how thrilled he was to have received an invitation to preach at St Paul's Cathedral. Like me, he is a Free Church Minister, and it had been pointed out to him that it's been decades since someone from our tradition has filled the pulpit at St Paul's.

I imagine Hugh Latimer was just as thrilled to be asked, as Bishop of Worcester, to preach in 1539 at Westminster Abbey. Worcester is a city I love, and its cathedral is perched high up on the banks of the River Seven, but it's no metropolis. So, this would have been a big day for Latimer, made even bigger when, unexpectedly, he gets into the pulpit and sees Henry VIII in the congregation. For a time, Latimer had been favoured by Henry, but not now. As the English Church continued its Reformation journey, Henry wanted to slow Latimer down, even silence his calls for further reforms. And what the king wanted he normally got. So, what was Latimer, who was somewhat given to theatrics in the pulpit, to do in his sermon that morning.

Well, he set aside his prepared notes and performed a sort of monologue, first, as it were speaking to himself and saying: *Latimer, Latimer, remember that the King of England is here this morning.* No doubt everyone smiled and thought he would now water down his words accordingly. But no. Instead, in the monologue he retorted to himself: *But Latimer, Latimer, remember that the King of Kings is here this morning.*

And not long after that sermon the Bishop of Worcester was taken to the Tower of London and locked up.

Such a story, all be it from another time, begs the questions: *Can I just keep my faith private? What might happen if I make it public?*

So, let's look at today's gospel story on this second Sunday of Lent and try to think that through.

As Jesus journeys from the north to the south, from Galilee to Jerusalem, it becomes clearer with every step that he is walking into controversy. The struggles are personal and are growing.

Herod Antipas has already beheaded the forerunner, John the Baptist and now seems to have his sights set upon his cousin, Jesus. Maybe Herod was nothing more than Rome's errand boy, charged with keeping the peace in his corner of an empire that all too easily and indiscriminately squashed alternate voices.

Scholars of antiquity believe Herod would have loved to have been thought of as a Lion, brave and fearless, yet in today's gospel Jesus calls him a mere fox. It was, no doubt carefully chosen, for in the grand scheme of things although foxes might be cunning, they are nowhere near on the same level as a lion.

Yet, Jesus is struggling on at least two fronts here. The authorities may be coming down on him, whilst at the same time, many from his own tradition were turning their backs upon both him and God. The prophets, he says, have been preaching for centuries but haven't been listened to. So, he weeps over Jerusalem and its house of prayer, the Temple. He laments the disconnect he senses between true faith and everyday living, and he likens his longings to a hen wanting to gather up her chicks so they could shelter under her wings. It is a picture of God as mother holding us as her children.

So, yes, this is a hard moment for Jesus and if Lent sometimes speaks to us of personal struggle, it's certainly to be found here in the life of our Lord.

In response to Herod Jesus says soon (that's what 3 days means in Jewish terminology – 40 days means a long time, 3 days means a short time) – soon, maybe even in 3 days, he'll be gone. But not to a place of safety, but to Jerusalem and to a cross.

Of course the term three days, in the Easter narrative at least, always brings with it a sense of hope. Jesus might die upon Good Friday's cross, yet in three days there will be a Resurrection.

Luke's gospel would have been first read about AD 80. Ten years before, in AD70 the Romans had raised Jerusalem's Temple to the ground, all that was left was the Wailing Wall. People of faith, both Jews and Christians, were struggling in AD80. So, just maybe, passages like today's were the evangelists' ways of bringing encouragement and inspiration to their readers. The story of Jesus, just like his followers, was one of struggle. Yet, in three days, hope returned, and new life was experienced that made the future possible.

The rooms along the outer corridor of our building are all named after non-conformist saints from the past like Wesley – actually I'm not really sure if that room is actually named after John Wesley the preacher, or Charles Wesley, his brother the hymn writer. Perhaps it should really be called The Wesleys – plural – room!

Well one of the middle rooms is named after Carey – not the former Archbishop but the very first Baptist missionary. He went out, in 1793, to Serampore in India and although

today he's considered as something of a hero, the founder of the Indian Horticultural Society and the training college at Serampore, he worked for seven years before Krisna Pal became the first person he baptised. During those years his wife, Dorothy, succumbed to tropical fever and died, and the printing house, containing thousands of manuscripts ready for printing the New Testament in the local dialect, burned down with everything lost. Yet, despite the struggle he continued. He once said of himself *I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit*. That's not a bad characteristic for any disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ, to be a plodder – and to keep on, keeping on. Perhaps Carey knew about the three days, that much of today might have echoes of Good Friday, yet Easter Morning will bring hope and renewal.

Now, in this morning's narrative there is something of an intriguing reference to The Pharisees. There were probably about 6,000 of them during the days of Jesus and they were the biggest single group within Judaism, much bigger than the Sadducees, their priestly and elite rivals. The Pharisees survived after the fall of the temple and grew into the Rabbinic Judaism of today.

Yet, in some gospel passages Jesus calls them a *Brood of Vipers*, maybe because of the very strict and particular way they interpreted the Jewish Law. Yet, one or two seem to have become his followers because both Nicodemus, who met Jesus at night, and Joseph of Arimathea, who lent him his tomb, were Pharisees. Well, here in Luke 13 a group of Pharisees turn up with inside information. They were obviously close to Herod and warn Jesus the king was out to get him, so *leave this place*, they say.

Surely there's much to learn from this small detail. Our prejudice can mislabel those we might consider different to ourselves. Yet such bigotry can be blown out of the water when we get to know those we too quickly have written off. So, Luke honours the part these Pharisees played in today's gospel.

And it's at this point, I think, when we see the steely nerve of Jesus develop. That's because if he had been nothing more than a personal rabbi or healer, then maybe others would have sung his praises and considered him to be a great guy. At the individual level Jesus wasn't a threat he's simply a good man, full of compassion. Yet, he doesn't leave it at that level, instead he enters the public sphere. So, in the temple precincts he overturns the tables of the money changers and in so doing directly threatens the sort of status quo over which he weeps at the end of today's passage. Just to heal individuals makes Jesus a good man, but to be angry like that with the corrupt money lenders is to attack the system, and this makes Jesus not a good, but a dangerous man.

Yesterday was the 15<sup>th</sup> March and sixty years ago on that day in 1965 President Johnson addressed a Joint Session of Congress just eight days after that famous March from Selma. These were days that changed the world giving full civil rights to everyone in the United States.

Selma has become iconic. It's as important as Rosa Park's stand against racism on a Montgomery bus

or Martin Luther King's Dream Speech at the Lincoln Memorial. And at its centre was a little-known church elder. Jimmie Lee Jackson was a Christian man serving in his church as the youngest elder of the congregation, just 26 years of age. His faith prompted him to join a march from the local Methodist church to the town's jail where African Americans were being detained because they protested after being refused voter registration, which although nationally sanctioned as a theoretical right was at the discretion of local authorities. The group that Jimmie Lee Jackson walked with that evening intended to arrive at the jail, sing hymns outside it and then walk home again. Their beliefs energised them. State troopers attacked this church group, Jimmie took his mother and sister, who had walked with him, into Jack's café behind the jail, but the troopers followed and shot Jimmie twice in the abdomen as he pinned his mother to the wall shielding her.

Jimmie Lee Jackson's death, twelve days later in hospital, galvanised the people of Selma to march, many of them shoot by state troopers as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

President Johnson was horrified by this and gave his speech writer just 12 hours to come up with a piece based on the African Spiritual *We shall overcome some day*. The President stood before Congress and declared: *All of us must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. Their cause must become our cause*. The Voter Registration Bill was passed later that year making the rights of African Americans non-discretionary at the ballot box.

Pictures of Selma show the great and the good at the front of the march. Yet the motivation for it came because of the courage of a young Christian man, the youngest elder in his church, whose faith motivated him to live out his faith in the most challenging situations. I'm inspired by the example of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a voice from the past teaching us lessons for today.

Sometimes, perhaps often times, we need to find the courage to move from private to public faith. It's a stepping up.

Of course, many aspects of our faith will be deeply personal, practiced in private, fostered either alone or in small groups. We are grateful to God for such foundational contexts that have nurtured and continue to sustain us. Yet those foundations can support us as we seek to live out our faith, whether that's being part of a political party, helping to run a community group for the vulnerable, supporting an overseas charity like Street Kids Direct, volunteering at the Child Contact Centre, writing to our MP about climate issues, helping to establish better palliative care in the community. The list is endless and as Christian service can be expressed in a thousand and one different ways both inside and outside of the church – just maybe – the question - *Can I just keep my faith private?* - becomes rhetorical

Today we have travelled alongside the Jesus who stepped up and spoke up, who challenged Herod the Fox and kept on walking, very publicly, towards the city he wept over, Jerusalem and then on towards the cross.

May God give us all courage for the journey, in the name of Jesus who showed us the way, and the Holy Spirit who enables us to live out our faith every day. Amen.