

Speak Tenderly

Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

Ascension Stirchley, Advent II, 10th December 2023

We may not feel like speaking tenderly to Jerusalem just now. We did on October 7th. We must not lose the compassion we felt that day, but our distress at the devastation and death in Gaza comes from exactly the same place in the gut.

When Isaiah spoke, the people were scattered across a brutal foreign empire and those who did remain in Jerusalem were treated more harshly than those gradually assimilating into the oppressor's regime. He spoke to a powerless people waiting for God to come and fix things.

When John the Baptist speaks, he speaks to a people a few hundred years later, now in their own land, but also occupied by an Empire that makes Babylon look like a kitten. They are waiting for the anointed one Isaiah anticipated to come and fix things. Jesus of Nazareth came, but not entirely as they had expected.

When Peter wrote to a community firmly believing God *had* come in Jesus of Nazareth to fix things, they still seem to be waiting for something, needing patience, needing encouragement.

As all three speak to us today, and we pray lamely for God to come and fix things in Jerusalem, we hear the shape of the Prophets' and Apostle's encouragement and wonder how it might work in our lives.

John, preparing the crowd for Jesus' arrival, gives the people of his generation some agency, some active, meaningful thing they can do to get ready, something worth doing in itself; something that will create the conditions in which Jesus's ministry will bear fruit; something that will make them receptive to whatever he brings. John baptises them, giving them a new start, while they are waiting for the new start God will bring. Don't wait for everything to be sorted. You can begin to make a difference now.' He is ministering very much in the tradition of Isaiah. For a Gospel so brief, breathy and urgent, it's funny that Mark insists on focusing on clothing and footwear. John's clothing as a literary device clearly to identify him with Elijah. Kneeling to do Jesus' laces would be menial. He claims to be unworthy even of that, so great is the one to come. How does Jesus behave when he comes? He submits to John's Isaiah-Elijah ministry, humbly bowing under the waters of Baptism. So in fewer words than I use explaining them, Mark helps us feel at the outset Jesus' might and humility; his power and his tenderness.

The modern state of Israel is not congruent with the concept of God's people, Israel, but of course the Hebrew heritage shimmers through, so the ironies and tragedies of biblical patterns of conflict repeated today are heart breaking. One of the deeply frustrating things about the present conflict is the way each side shouts at the other from what they each think is morally high ground. It is not, but it feels like it to them. Meanwhile, those attacked, raped, captured, bombed, displaced are surely in the deepest trough of despair. The present conflict begs the question of the text Who are 'my people?' We want God to come and comfort those tortured by the attack on 7th October and protect his people from all the hatred in the region out of which that wickedness came. At the same time, from the same place in any compassionate human heart, what will God do to rescue and protect those whom today's Jerusalem government bombs? Taking the body of prophetic literature Isaiah holds as a whole, its momentum leads towards God's people Israel helping all the nations to discover that all nations are God's people.

Terrifying details emerge of the sexual violence perpetrated on 7th October as a deliberate part of the murderous day. Typically in this conflict, as with the missile strikes on hospitals, there ensues a pendulum swinging dispute about verification. If even some of the findings of Lucy Williamson are proved to be true, any thought of high ground on Hamas' part would, of course, be ludicrous and despicable. Already, any whiff of a claim that they acted in the name of Islam is blasphemous. If evil sexual violence was committed against Israeli women that day, it would also mean the women of Gaza are not safe. For if the leadership under whom Palestinians live underwrite such sexual violence, no woman is safe in Gaza either. For the fundamental attitude to womanhood among the male leadership is revealed and any acquiescing under that leadership are contributing, however passively, to that patriarchal violent culture. The moral high ground is gone. The mountain is made low.

Isaiah gives agency to the beleaguered people of Israel in exile, telling them to get busy lowering the mountain and lifting up the valley. Even before God comes with any kind of solution they are encouraged to be active in the work of preparation; they are given the dignity of agency when, in exile, they thought they had none. "Don't just sit and wait. Create the conditions in which God's presence will bear fruit among us," cries Isaiah.

Today, in Palestine, many, many people are tear jerkingly, astonishingly courageous, lifting each other up, trying to bake bread, trying to offer medical care, wanting to be as kind as possible in such a cruel environment, doing their bit to lift up the valley of despair. Perhaps also, some need more actively to begin resisting, crumbling, then scrabbling, then tearing away at moral high ground claimed by their brutal leadership whose shameless provocation and evil violence is now reaping the whirlwind.

Today in the State of Israel, many are working to comfort the wounded and bereaved, many are courageously looking into the dark void of evil to gather evidence of atrocities committed against women that day. Some are reaching out to Arab neighbours, refusing to dehumanise people with whom they've learned to live and break bread in more peaceable times. Some are still collecting Palestinians from the West Bank to drive them safely to medical appointments. Every such act helps lift up the valley of despair and bitterness. Perhaps some Israelis see the moral high ground claimed by their state crumbles with every thudding missile, every collapsing tower block or hospital, every civilian death in Gaza. Perhaps like me they are wondering if the military action justified from the moral high ground is not creating the conditions in which peace may come, but rather is digging deeper the valley of bitterness where hatred is spawned and Hamas recruits its fighters. They are making the mistake we made in the illegal Iraq War and its aftermath from there to Afghanistan. Could it be that there will be no peace until the moral high ground is lowered and people can stand, human before human, and God can get a word in edgeways?

When God does, we find the strong arm of God not sweeping away those we call our enemies, but clutching a lamb protectively. The shepherd protects the sheep. Can Israeli reach the point of imagining God protecting his Palestinian sheep, and can Palestinians imagine God protecting his Israeli sheep, and all nations finding peace in God's multi ethnic, multi-cultural human flock?

This is not to speak cheaply of equal blame. It is, though, to wonder how we create the conditions in which we will be receptive to God coming to help us imagine an equality of dignity.

The pattern of these three encouraging passages about waiting does not only work on the grand stage of international crisis. When Peter says a thousand years and a day are alike to God, it reassures us God does the very big and the very small; God attends to the long story and the quotidian detail. Our sibling rivalries, our workplace tensions, our school playground conflicts are no less in His/Her view and care. The scriptures compel us to recognise in our own lives that no one looks attractive on moral high ground. They invite us to take courage, find agency, show

faithfulness by lowering the mountains of pride and hills of moral high ground, and raising the valleys of bitterness and depressing helplessness. Even when feeling wronged, or powerless, we can find dignity and agency in doing the smallest things that may begin the levelling and so create the conditions in which God might get a word in edgeways; the small but brave gestures that resist de-humanising the other; the small kindnesses that dissolve bitterness.

As the ferocious flinging of bombs and mortars and snipers and street fighting are narrated in ugly righteous tones, and yet human courage glows amidst the rubble, let us pray for all whose defiant generosity helps begin that levelling of ground in a place where we still cannot imagine peace. If we want to create the conditions where God may show Her protective love, the language of tenderness is exactly what Jerusalem and Gaza need to hear.