



(From The Horrors of War, Francisco de Goya, Prado Museum)

On God alone my soul in stillness waits

Psalm 62

Mark 1:14-20

Remembrance Sunday 10th November 2024, All Saints Kings Heath

When worldly leadership is capricious, threatening, egotistical and dependent on belittling those who disagree, we might well be tempted to hide away and hope the storm passes. It was the arrest of John the Baptist, now a political prisoner, that prompted Jesus to start drawing together a learning community, a preaching community, a neuro-diverse community. Jesus very publicly and defiantly responds to oppression by setting about creating an alternative community in plain sight. He calls impulsive Peter, talkative, sociable Andrew, and two brothers, James and John, whom he will nick name "sons of thunder" as their fiery character shows through. There's no hint of perfectionism about Jesus' alternative community, but it is marked by resilient hope. Good news, Mark announces. There **is** good news. Even when the political backdrop is bleak, there is still **good news**. Mark doesn't say much about what the good news is. Jesus says the "Kingdom of God has come near" but nothing more specific. It's provocative. King Herod has made the news because of his reckless cruelty. Jesus (so recently and publicly baptised by John) immediately courts danger by speaking of an alternative Kingdom. Another kind of rule. Mark will go on to show us the defiantly generous life of Jesus until we realise Jesus **is** the good news. His life is one very much in the tradition of Psalm 62 where there are

powerful persuasive forces trying to win attention, but where the poet knows God alone is the source of his confidence, the key to his choices and his place of safety.

Look at Jesus, and we see what a human being looks like when they are not in thrall to earthly hierarchies and powers. We know from recent weeks' readings later in the Gospel that the followers of Jesus are competitive and clumsy like everyone else, but they at least turn to look to him to re-orientate and recalibrate their behaviour. That's what it means to "repent" – to turn around. There's nothing wrong with earning a living fishing, but telling them they'll be fishing for people from now on is a playful metaphor with which Jesus draws the disciples to care more for people than for money. (If riches increase, do not set your heart on them, as the Psalm said.) Herod had arrested John to grab attention and frighten everyone into obedience. "Turn around," Jesus, says in response. "Don't look to Herod for your guidance. Don't orientate yourself by fixating on the loudest, the richest, the most powerful, the most attention seeking."

Jesus seems deliberately to be ignoring Herod, about whom he can do little. Rather, he puts his energy into getting on with the work of community-building among the people he finds himself among. Instead of bemoaning the threat of Herod, he pushes back the shadow with the brightness of his hope and attentiveness to the poor and marginalised. Imprisoning a popular preacher, Herod attempts to draw all loyalty, or at least obedience, to himself. Instead of accepting the fragmentation of community which authoritarianism works at, Jesus defiantly forges connections with people.

I wonder what you make of the American election result. Half of America think Trump is Herod; half think he's Moses. If we feel helpless in prayer for America, Jesus invites us to get on with what we can shape and do: to forge generous, diverse community and talk about something other than the vain hopes and promises of those who seek our loyalty through flattery, deceit or fear. Hopeful, generous lives outshine selfishness and fear; healthy community makes dictatorship look ridiculous and banal; diversity in community challenges prejudice and unravels the confidence trick of autocracy. God's Kingdom is near, whoever is in charge. It's within the reach of ordinary, flawed people like us. Ordinary, flawed US citizens who have cast their ballot.

I did not want to see Goya's Horrors of War drawings and paintings again, but I knew I must, when I visited the Prado this summer. His unflinching gaze on human pathos and cruelty, recording what he witnessed in the Peninsula Wars at the beginning of the 19th century are too, too relevant today. I remembered this painting more than most, and felt its dreadful power no less than the first time I saw it, now infused with daily announcements of senseless civilian deaths in Gaza. I kept my gaze on the figures about to die and stayed with it for as long as I could. (On God alone my soul in stillness waits.) It dawned on me how carefully composed it is. The hunched figures with rifles are shrouded in darkness. They are unified by uniform: a sinister identity, yet one that anonymises them. We do not see their faces. The tragic figures to the left are in the light, their faces plain, identifiable, full of feeling. They are connected to each other, they help each other, bearing one

another up. One is calling out the truth of what is happening, arms aloft, less in surrender than exasperation. He shines in white, embodying some kind of truth. His startled face reveals, through his fear, how ridiculous this brutal execution is. Staying with this image, I realised Goya wanted to show how warm and alive the human beings on the left are; so full of feeling; so vulnerable. How hard, cold, sad, deathly the human beings on the right are, brutalised, their souls dissolving into darkness. Herod's world is on the right. Jesus' Kingdom is on the left of this picture.

The Jesus community will go on to face just such senseless cruelty. But indeed they will keep speaking up, with determined adaptability, always ready to forge generous community whatever the prevailing regime. We know what bad remembering can do. Nationalistic nostalgia is dangerous. Triggering painful memory can be distressing. Nurturing hatred is catastrophic. Good remembering should be a character of the Christian community, primarily remembering Jesus' death and resurrection in this symbolic meal. That re-remembering joins us together with him, energises us with his spirit. We know how dangerous and self-justifying selective memory can be, used to foment and perpetuate prejudice. We know how distorting nostalgic memory can be used to distract from present responsibility. It's been said that the Church's witness is to "remember for transformation."¹ Remembrance should always have the purpose of positive transformation as its aim: it may begin as a way of showing empathy with the oppressed; then that memory becomes a source of wisdom and learning; then it can become a step on the road to healing. Honest memory will always witness to ambiguity, and be suspicious of certainty in historical narratives.

Through its later history, tragically, the church has at times aligned with Herod and become part of the problem. We must remember that. Hopefully today, our power flaked away, we might have a chance to be part of the solution. Goya with searing honesty records the horrors of war, so solidarity with the oppressed is stirred. Then, wisdom can be forged from our revulsion as we keep the memories in view so as to highlight the oppressed victims of today. This is where our calling is to be found. But then, as in this painting, we are pointed to deeper truth about what constitutes an integrated human life, revealed in the vulnerability and exasperation of the community in the light. Our eyes drift right and we are given something to think about even in the shady violent invaders. For they are oppressed in a different way from the people they point their guns at. The aim of Goya's remembering is the transformation of humanity, both victim and perpetrator.

For those in our community who with proper pride wear Military uniforms, we are challenged by the Psalm and by Goya to pray that our armed services will be asked to spend their energies protecting the oppressed, not oppressing further. Also, we are prompted to pray that they will find around them people who can speak tenderly, encourage vulnerability, stillness, and restore connectivity so that they need not sacrifice their humanity in order to perform harsh tasks the rest of us ask of them.

¹ Redeeming Memories: a theology of healing and transformation by Flora A. Keshgegian, esp Ch 6

For all of us, deeply wearied and frightened by war, dismayed by who is put in charge around the world, we are called to be a defiantly generous, reflective, preaching community, a neuro-diverse community that, however clumsily, always looks towards the light of Christ whose arms were stretched out less in surrender than expression of exasperation at how ridiculous cruelty is. We are to resist the dangerous selective memory of populism by remembering in full expectation of healing and transformation, radically expecting transformation not only for those on the left, but also those on the right.