

### Sermon: Matthew 22.1-14

The events of this past week have fallen heavily on my heart. That is not simply because I now know that I will not, in a few days' time, be escorting a group of Christian pilgrims around Jerusalem and Galilee, places I have grown to love – that heaviness is rather centred on what we have all seen, and what that has to say about the reality of human brokenness.

This came home to me this week, in a strange way, when I led Evensong here last Tuesday evening. As ever in the midst of a busy life I had not read the biblical readings set, until I read them in the service, and so in that moment the contents of Jeremiah 52.1-16 were as much a surprise to me as anyone present. I won't read it to you now, but you might like to look it up later. In short it is an account of the Babylonian sacking of Jerusalem with all the accompanying gore and bloodshed that the Old Testament can muster, just the kind of passage that in our moments of polite intellectualising that we would say has very little to offer to us today as we think about a God of love who cares for us.

A passage then, that would not normally in any sense resonate with our lives. The problem for me though, as I read it – a problem I know that some people also felt as they heard it - is that it sounded like a contemporary news report – I felt just for a moment that I could have been reading it from the BBC newsfeed.

In a way that is shocking, and I think we – I guess thinking of the 'we' in terms of the whole of humanity - perpetually fool ourselves that we have somehow grown up from our ancestral roots and are on an ever-progressing journey towards our own salvation. I know myself at times that I want to think that - and then real events, make me take notice, and reveal me to be the fool I can be.

The three great faiths of the world would in some sense recognise those words of Jeremiah as God inspired but as their people struggle for room and space in the very complex place that is the Holy Land, it appears that they might read them as a justification for reprisal, rather than as a warning that the cycle of destruction needs to be broken.

Yet in terms of common humanity – in the simplest terms of being made in the image of God – might not all of these people be called to be present at that great wedding banquet we hear of in our Gospel reading today. Called indeed just as we are called, as we too can only number ourselves among those described as 'the good and the bad'.

I appreciate the idealism I am showing here, as somehow, I consider a banqueting table at which everyone would be welcome, present there simply because God's image is imprinted on each one of them - but I think that is what the God I have come to believe in – a God I personally find best

revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, would want. And yes, I think of God to be loving, to want the best for us, ultimately to be prepared to give himself for us. At the same time though, even though we seem incapable of it, I do also think that God would want us to try to be better - to break the cycle and to set aside the broken human desires we have to dominate and destroy. I believe also that he weeps and suffers again when we abjectly fail to do this.

His message to us is loving then, but it is not without edge – not without demand - and that is illustrated – in our reading - by the fate of the man in the wrong clothes. To sit at the table demands a responsibility and that responsibility in this case is to wear the right clothes. We might think that his fate in the end is out of proportion with the sin of getting the dress code wrong, but in the way of the hyperbole, often deployed in parables, it is illustrative of him not recognising the importance of his presence there in the first place.

What then is our responsibility as we sit at that table? We are all a long way from the Holy Land here this morning – and, as ever when we look upon tragic events of our world at a distance, we feel powerless and that there is nothing we can do. Is that though just our version of not knowing the dress code, of not grasping the responsibility we have as God's people?

Geo-political events led to the foundation of the state of Israel which both resolved the moral dilemma the world felt regarding the fate of the Jewish people in a post-holocaust world – while creating the moral dilemma of the displaced Palestinian people. What was created brought a problem that has never been resolved, but in more recent times the world has done very little to even address it. I heard in coverage yesterday someone say that there has been no diplomatic activity on the question of Israel and the Palestinian territories since 2014 - and I think that is broadly right. In the meanwhile, sadly, in a throwback to previous tragic conflicts those involved have been in their trenches occasionally shelling each other and waiting, once again, to go over the top. So, it is the fault of our politicians you might think who have failed to address this - but I do wonder if that is just a way of our avoiding any responsibility. Just maybe we too are guilty of dress code failure, as in the end, in the democratic world we are fortunate to live in, we are those who should be telling them what to focus on, as we elect them. If it is the case that our vote is only deployed in our own interest or even our own national interest, there is I think a sadness in that, as in the end we cannot fail to notice – particularly here and particularly now - that we are a part of a global community.

Nothing that I have said here, is in any sense meant to exonerate anyone from the responsibility they properly hold for the appalling things they have done to others this past week - which have been both distressing and barbaric. And though it remains sadly true that incidents of human inhumanity have run as an unbroken thread through human history, I am not sure that means we should simply

accept them without somehow trying to address them. They are simply not condonable in every sense intolerable.

Within my own sense of powerlessness my one instinctive response right now, is to fall back on prayer and hope that the horror of these past days will end. I'm left though thinking that praying, great as it is, is not all that should be done here. There is a need for us, at the same time, to say to those to whom we give authority, that the apparently irresolvable problems of our world will never go away if they are never addressed. There has been a global failure here to do anything in recent years other than just take sides, something which tragically, in the end, has just exacerbated the conflict and fuelled the violence that has then flowed from it.