

I LAY DOWN MY STONES

REFLECTIONS FOR ASH WEDNESDAY

10am at St Barnabas, 12 noon at St Wulstans and 7pm at St Barnabas

2nd March 2022

Readings: Daniel 3, Psalm 51 and John 8:1-11

Wilderness, solitary, lonely, desolate, uninhabited expanses, the desert is never far away in the Bible. “Where is your God?” so often had the answer “We met him in the desert places, in the wilderness, we heard his voice.” In every significant life story, at every fork in the road, wilderness is quite literally the landscape on which the covenant stories are mapped. Each Ash Wednesday, our thoughts turn towards the desert, as we see Jesus, turning to the wilderness.

Jesus withdrew often to lonely places. After all, “He that the great, good thing would know must to the Silent Places go,” wrote Jeffrey Farnol. But, today, literally and physically, he was in the midst of the Temple courts, surrounded by ordinary people drinking up his stories and sayings when he is ambushed by the Jewish authorities, using as bait, as nameless, defenceless, compromised woman.

And yet in his heart and mind I think I catch a glimpse of the wilderness, an echo of the desert instead. I can feel him slowing the scene down to the rhythm of the desert. The breathless attack is robbed of its urgency as Jesus begins to move slowly and deliberately, as you would in the desert. Stooping down, he fixes his attention on the earth in which he silently now writes, moving his finger in the dust.

In the Temple courts that day, the act of entrapment feels familiar. Accusers seeking to draw Jesus out into rash self-declarations. Accusers who throw scripture at him looking to illicit hasty signs and wonders. Sounds like the desert struggles over stones and bread, temple heights and global fame. "It is written," was the line in the sand Jesus had drawn each time on that earlier occasion. This time he doesn't speak at all, he simply writes unspoken, unknown words with his finger in the dust at their feet.

Eventually he does speak. Raising himself up to his full height, Jesus responds. He has drawn on the resources of the wilderness and with devastatingly simple wisdom, gives permission for the stoning to proceed. On one condition. A condition so famous, it too has passed into everyday speech. Casting the first stone. Only those who are blameless before the Law can carry out its righteous requirements.

The laws of Israel were lovingly crafted to foster a beloved community, a beacon, a foretaste. The rituals and the regulations were designed to draw individuals into belonging, where no-one was outsider. This way of being is for lifestyle of togetherness.

- To CONGREGATE is to agree together
- To CONCRESCERE is to grow together
- To CONJURATE is to swear an oath together
- To COLLACHRYMATE is to cry together
- To CONFABULATE is to talk together
- To CONFEDERATE is to unite together

What a contrast with this set-up in the Temple, where all they've managed to do is CONSPIRE together, to CONDEMN together and to CONTAMINATE together the sacred space and common ground on which they have gathered. How ugly it is when these paths for righteousness become pretexts for violation, for violence, for self-promotion and diminishing of the other. Have you ever really stopped to imagine this scene, it's brutality, it's calculation, it's manipulation, it's hidden agendas, it's inhumanity.

And this Lent, this Ash Wednesday, in this defenceless, encircled woman, I see also women, children and men in Ukraine, where righteousness has become a pretext for violation, for violence, for self-promotion and diminishing of the other. Haven't we been shaken to our cores to see the scenes unfolding before our eyes: the brutality, the calculation, the manipulation, the hidden agendas, the inhumanity.

And why in heaven's name is Jesus only stooping down, fixing his attention on the earth, silently moving his fingers in the dust? It is one of life's profound ironies that the moments of greatest inhumanity, we ask "Where is our God?" Perhaps that is because it is easier than the more painful task of asking questions of ourselves as individuals, as nations and as a species. We are beautiful. We are brutal. We are broken. We are bankrupt.

At the beginning of the scene, Jesus is surrounded in the press of people in the Temple Courts, and into the midst of this noisy crowd, without compassion or integrity, scribes and Pharisees have thrust the nameless, defenceless, compromised woman. At the end of the scene, the crowd, the noise has all gone. If we could ask the woman left standing alone before Jesus, "Where is your God?" I wonder how she would answer?

The God of the wilderness is seated on the ground of the very courts of the Temple. One by one, men and women, clergy and laity, come face to face with their inner selves in the presence of their God. One by one, from those old enough to be wise, to the youngest, they lay down their stones and they melt away, as Jesus stoops once again to write with his finger in the sand.

They laid down their stones. And we are going to do the same together now. We are going to agree together, to grow together, to swear an oath together. We are coming to cry together, to talk together, to unite together. And as Daniel prayed, so we pray:

Incline your ear, O my God, and hear.

Open your eyes and look.

We do not present our supplication before you
on the ground of our righteousness
but on the ground of your great mercies.

O Lord, hear, O Lord, forgive.

O Lord, listen and act and do not delay

And we lay down our stones. We lay them down at the feet of the one who sits amidst the dust of the ground before us.

Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. We are left alone with Jesus on the ground before us. You see, the Lenten wilderness is not a time or a place. It is forty days spent being held in the gaze of Jesus, as this woman is in the moment. Lent is forty days of freeze frame or slow motion, before the dawning Easter sunrise, when Jesus straightens up from his tomb, and says to us “No one has condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

For the sacrifice of God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
our God will never, ever despise.