

In the world of politics, in the wake of any election to a position of leadership, there is always a period of time as the victor consolidates his or her position in the team they choose to gather around them. We have seen in the wake of the competition for the leadership of the Tory party in the UK and in the election for the Presidency of the United States that this can be quite a brutal process. Those who backed the winner can be expected to reap the rewards of loyalty, or at the very least their astuteness, while those on the losing side can see political careers come to a juddering halt. I would suspect at various stages in the run up to elections some people may have been asking themselves ‘Have I backed the right person? – or have I got it wrong?’

In first century Palestine, now under Roman rule, periodically charismatic leaders arose who were identified with the expected Jewish Messiah. These leaders evoked differing levels of enthusiasm but they were all put down and the leaders and many of their followers died violent and tragic deaths.

Over the course of the season of Advent we follow the ministry of John the Baptist who felt called to proclaim the coming of God’s Messiah and in the different Gospel accounts pointed his followers to the person of Jesus. In our Gospel reading this morning we find John in prison. Maybe in the darkness and loneliness of his prison cell John had his moments of doubt. As he heard of some of the things Jesus was doing and saying he wondered, ‘Did I get it wrong, did I point to the wrong person? Have I failed not only myself but the people I directed towards Jesus?’

And so from his prison cell, he sends word, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”. Jesus sends back words of reassurance that evoke passages we read in Isaiah

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. *Is 35:5,6*

Go and tell John what you have seen. You are not mistaken; your life has not been in vain. You have not failed.

As I mused over that Gospel passage this week, a not unrelated question came to my mind, that of the whole issue of doubt in our own walk with God. When we were in Prague earlier this week, we visited the Jewish quarter of the city, visited synagogues that were once thriving places of worship, now housing exhibition centres. On the wall of one was written the names of every Jew from Prague who had perished in the gas chambers of the last war. As we look at things like that, as we look at the suffering of the world about us, whether it be in the city of Aleppo, in the wake of an earthquake or simply in the plight of a mother and doctor in court reliving the events that culminated in the death of her child and her facing charges of manslaughter – which of us at times has not found ourselves asking, ‘Where is God in all of this?’

As I try to make sense of all of this, I find myself turning more and more to the Psalms, the Psalms that would have been well known by John the Baptist and by Jesus. It is as the Psalmist cries out ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’ that he begins to understand God’s presence in the lives of his forefathers, coming to an awareness of God’s presence with him as the psalm closes in thankful praise. It is as he cries out in his shame in Psalm 51

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God, in your great goodness; ♦
according to the abundance of your compassion
blot out my offences.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness ♦
and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I acknowledge my faults ♦
and my sin is ever before me.

that he come to his own understanding of God’s mercy, even to a sinner as he later confesses:

- 13 Give me again the joy of your salvation ♦
and sustain me with your gracious spirit;
- 14 Then shall I teach your ways to the wicked ♦
and sinners shall return to you.

In the Psalms I find that it is as I share my pain, my regrets, my anger, my thankfulness that I find in a way I find hard to explain that God is there, that he understands, that he sustains. I found myself returning to the closing passage of a book by the late Lord Hailsham, a leading Tory politician as I grew up, one time Home Secretary, finally serving as Lord Chancellor. In this book, 'A Sparrow's flight', he reflects on his own spiritual pilgrimage. In conclusion he wrote:

'And, lo, a paradox appears. I seek God, and behold a bedraggled human figure impaled for ridicule upon a cross. I despair of man, and behold the same figure, enthroned in majesty above the clouds. If I go up to heaven he is there. If I descend into the depths of misery and grief, he is there also. He is Alpha and Omega, the source of my being and the end of my pilgrimage. He is love, at once the beloved and the eternal lover. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, at once the creator, the redeemer, the inspirer of suffering humanity, the companion on my way and the strengthener of my steps. But he is himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is unknown and unknowable, yet constantly revealed, revealed in nature, in beauty, in goodness, in knowledge, but always absent in the negative, the hated and the hateful. He is always present yet constantly eludes my grasp. Being infinite, he cannot be comprised in my understanding. Nevertheless as constantly, he reappears in my need. Remaining Christian, I am constantly reassured in my wandering, in my doubting and as constantly lead back by my trusting. I do not know. I do not pretend to know. But I trust, and therefore I believe. Now I see through a glass, darkly. The time is not far distant when, infinitely contrite, I must seek the mercy of an infinitely compassionate judge, and then, face to face, I shall know, even as I am known.'

A Sparrow's Flight – Lord Hailsham p 452

“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk” God is still present, even in your doubts and your fears. Rest in his presence and find his peace.