

# New Kilpatrick

## Sermon

1st December 2019

Isaiah 2:1-5

***Spirit... may we hear you again... in a time that needs inspiration... that needs good news... that needs advent... to inspire... to raise us into hope again... Spirit... come and by the imagination we need... So be it... Amen***

There is often an early morning oasis each day on Radio Four... at about quarter to eight with Thought for the Day... I usually have half an ear listening to it... but on Thursday both ears tuned in... as Jonathan Sacks told a story from earlier this week... about a couple of Jewish children traveling on the London Underground... when a man came up... whom they did not know... and for 20 minutes he harangued them in the most anti-semitic way...

When someone tried to intervene... that person was threatened with violence... and then a young woman confronted the man... and with calmness... told him that he was wrong in what he was doing...

I don't know exactly what she said... but it was enough to distract him... and calm him...

The woman was a young muslim wearing a hijab... her name was Azma... who had herself been on the receiving end of racist abuse... as increasingly more in our communities are now facing...

But what Azma chose to do was not let that intimidate her... but use that experience to identify with the Jewish family that day... We'd call that brave... we'd even call it heroic in some way... in standing up to what was happening... but the fact we describe it in such terms... and that this is still a story that happens... shames us... and is deeply shocking...

And there is a version of the faith... and Friday's terrorist attack shows us this... something alive in every faith... be that a religious or political faith... where we actually believe... the world is better... when we are all the same... a belief Friday's attacker had... that was counter to mainline Islam... a belief that identifies a single nation... or faith... or group... as being more significant than others because of culture... power... or

history... And at least two of our political parties are embroiled in responding to anti-semitic and islamaphobic allegations... as well as our own faith having made a name for itself... on such abuse...

To walk on that ground is as old as humanity itself... and to speak of such... is even older than speech itself... To find ourselves still doing so... when the philosophies of the enlightenment... and the higher histories of our religions... and the prophets of our faith... shaped words and ideas and morals that were meant to lift us up from such base places... inviting us to see God in the breadth of humanity... rather than its self-identifying similarity... disappoints as much as shocks us...

The Old Testament... is not a book always known for its generosity towards other nations... yet those passages we can almost recite from the prophets... that we read time and time again especially in this season of the year... have the most astounding... universalist view of humanity...

And interestingly... it is these parts we remember more than all the others... and are able to quote... “the people that walked in darkness”... “let your light shine”... “wonderful counsellor”... because perhaps... let us believe... these ideas still appeal... despite our fall from grace and the lowering of our politics... these still inspire... still offers us hope... they are still that corrective to where we so often end up... in our faith and in our politics... and the shallowness these institutions can become...

Listen to the prophets... we plead in these times... that have something better to say... something positive and life-giving to offer... because they themselves have been there... They have known the prejudice... as a nation... as a religion... and they warn what that experience can do... if you choose to respond like for like...

For example... the most popular story in our faith... is David and Goliath... Such a daring story of a young boy... soon to be king... who takes on the might and power of their greatest enemy...

And we tell it to children as if this is some great moral principle... only to forget to tell them the second part... where the Davids become the Goliaths... where the young boy... grows up... and turns on his enemies... as Goliath did to him...

His response... is the lesser one... to Azma... who used the abuse she knew... to identify with others receiving abuse... and changed the kind of relationships you had with folk...

This is the humanity the prophets calls us to... the ethic they identify as lifting us up and out of our fear... for fear is always so much part of our fall into prejudice and racism...

And the prophets speak with great clarity for our time... not scared to call out Israel as much as any of her neighbouring nations... not to respond in kind... in hatred towards someone... and Isaiah sets the scene for this higher... universalist way of living... and way of identifying ourselves... in a dramatic image... of swords being beaten into ploughshares... and spears into pruning hooks...

Isaiah says... that which we use to put down... it may be physical weapons like swords and spears... or it may be the power of words... that which we use to put down another may be an instrument of war... or it may be prejudice and racism... but the way we *rise up* in our humanity... the way we identify more closely with what God is... is to reshape these instruments... repurpose our words... take that fear we have of the other... and use it to identify with the fear they have of us... and change the way we engage and relate to each other... no longer in fear of another... but recognising their pain by identifying our own... and change the kind of relationship we have...

And that is the very place we begin Advent... that universalist place... identifying with the abused... with the stranger... because in advent... that leads us to another story... of incarnation... and of God identifying with us... and that new relationship...

We have chosen to shape that truth... into a story of a child's birth... filled with angels and shepherds an stars and stables... And we tend to focus more on these than the truth itself... of a love that knows the pain of prejudice and the corruption of power... through anti-semitism... islamophobia... and far too many contemporary and not so contemporary ways we lessen people... a love that uses that pain... to identify with those who still receive it...

That is incarnation... a love... a god... who identifies with that... and that is the story we are shaping now in this new season... found in the prophets... who give us a choice... an invitation... to turn... and walk... in the light of the Lord...

This is now perhaps our place as a church in our contemporary communities... this is who we need to become once more... as racism and fear steadily increase... where elections call out such things... but politicians words are not always translated into actions...

And as a church we are called to be agents... prophets of transform... that turn swords to ploughshares... rarely is that about weapons... and far more often it is about words... to recreate relationships within the breadth of our humanity... taking the fear we have... the abuse may have received... and use that... to identify with others... not always like us... but who have experienced the same...

If we want to hear an advent word... there it is in the prophets... and every so often... it incarnates itself in such acts of people like Azma... beating verbal swords to ploughshares... and modelling for all of us... the universal truth... of what incarnation is... and who it is for...