



Take a deep breath and sing it again

I hadn't planned it this way but, on this day, when the gospel reading is about Jesus's interaction with the army, at the Vagabonds discussion group which is held after the service every month, I'd agreed to facilitate a discussion this week about whether there could be 'a just war'. The 'just war' tradition is a centuries old Christian reflection on the tragedy and failure that war represents and tries to find a way through the moral quagmire that wars present us. If you're interested, we'll be in the pub! And then later this afternoon, I'm recording an interval talk for Radio 3's live broadcast of tonight's Prom concert, which is Bach's St John Passion. My contribution to the discussion, which is with a musicologist, will be largely about how the gospel writers, to use the technical term, redacted (or edited) their stories all the better to communicate to their hearers and readers the good news they felt. Bach does the same.

In a funny way, these seemingly disparate experiences, put together with our really lively gospel conversations as we read through the gospel of Luke this month, come together and present what I think is a deeply challenging message of salvation (yes, salvation) wound around ethics and the choices we make each day about how we live.

But I'm going to start somewhere else. Recently, I went as usual to our International Group breakfast one Saturday morning. Men and women who are seeking asylum in this country for a whole variety of reasons, and who are not allowed to claim benefits or work, and so who are in danger of destitution, are invited to come and have a hot breakfast. The point is not just to have a nourishing hot and healthy meal together, although it is always that; the point is to have humane, respectful and friendly conversation with people whose lives are full of forms, officials asking intrusive questions, and a level of scepticism about their own stories that must be hard to live with.

I always come away with a sense that I have received much more than I have given but I recently had one conversation that was special. I spent time with two men, one from a South Asian country and one from an African country. Both claiming asylum for different reasons; one Christian, one Muslim. Both have experienced really terrible suffering and rejection. Both talked about what one called "chronic stress"; as soon as he said it, the other man nodded; and they talked about just not being able to remember things, getting lost on public transport even though they thought they knew where they were going. They talked about being let down, being lied to time and time again. They also talked about well-meaning people, like people on soup runs, or people like us, who, despite our best efforts, simply have no way of understanding what life is like. One put it this way, 'some people listen just to listen. But some people listen to you in order to try to understand you. That's the kind of listening that makes you less lonely.'

They didn't know each other but as our conversation wore on, I was amazed at how open they were, each about feeling lonely, about periods of having to sleep on the streets, about being unfriended by former friends on Facebook when it became apparent they were homeless, about enduring periods of detention.

But each, too, spoke about what one called 'the struggle' as an experience that also made them strong. They had nothing left to lose, except their life. And one really key theme for both of them was that they wanted to maintain their own integrity, not to give in to the strong temptation to just break the law a little, bend the rules, become a person they did not want to be. In the struggle one said, 'It's so important to keep your integrity.' I felt incredibly humbled by them both. One had said that despite everything, inside he felt like a lion. The other laughed and said, 'I'll be a tiger.' Today is today, and today is all we have because we are in limbo.

And one said to the other just as we were leaving, 'I have listened to you and you have encouraged me to carry on. You have given me strength.' I witnessed one man say this to the other; they shook hands and went back into the city and the system that is testing them mentally, physically, spiritually, almost until they break.

Luke's gospel we're reading through this month and next has strong themes, that Luke wants to put across by his editing of the stories and life of Jesus. From the very beginning in his stories about Jesus's birth, Luke sets up a set of oppositions. And we as hearers have stark choices.

He keeps letting us know that Jesus's way was not the way of the powerful religious or political elites. He keeps telling us that the leaders are highly sceptical of Jesus, but the people love him. In this part of the gospel, in the 5th, 6th and 7th chapters, he tells a story of a Gentile soldier and a widow. These people are totally surprising as religious role models. At this distance of 2000 years, we've lost the shock of it but we've already heard John has already been asked by soldiers, 'what shall we do?' and he says to them behave well, be satisfied with your wages, do not oppress the people. And now, perhaps a bit surprisingly for a teacher committed to peace, Jesus doesn't say to the man that unless he resigns from the army, he won't help him. There is a striking sense that Jesus meets the people where they are, in the jobs they're in, in the houses they occupy, in the situations they find themselves in in life.

The variety of people in these first few chapters of Luke's gospel is breath-taking. There are poor artisans, an 84 year old devotee of the Temple; there's a couple of elderly priests, some financiers and soldiers, a rather alarming prophet-figure who rants at the crowds in the desert and, just this morning, we met a woman seriously economically and socially disadvantaged because of her being a widow who has now lost the other male relative who might help her (her son) and in today's gospel, a powerful soldier, who has the authority to order men about and, if he chooses, reinforce a violent occupation. Every stratum of a multi-cultural society is here. Getting on with their lives.

A key characteristic of Jesus is that he meets them exactly where they are. He doesn't say they have to go to church to meet God. Quite the opposite. They find Jesus on the street, in the field, turning up at their workplace.

But, and here's a really astonishing aspect of these meetings. He turns up where they are but never just leaves them there unchanged. Some of them think they do need to change something in their lives, others really don't. Some ask him for help, others don't. There are as many ways to approach Jesus as there are people. Some seem to be full frontal, some ask him for stuff, others kind of sidle up, check it out, try to overhear without getting involved. All those ways of approaching faith, of trying to address God, find their place in this gospel...and find their place in our church. There will be such a variety even here this morning from the fervent to the hesitant to the sceptical to the wholehearted and every possible shade in-between. The point that is made time and time again in Luke's gospel is that we are to expect to be changed. *Change's gonna come*, to coin a phrase.

The Greek word is helpful here because it means a lot more than just change: it's the word *metanoia*, often translated as repentance which really doesn't mean feeling vaguely sorry for stuff or obsessed by the things we regret. It simply means change of heart and mind, change of attitude, change of mindset.

This encounter between the soldier and the preacher is so unusual. The Gentile soldier, who had immense power over Jesus as a Jewish teacher, comes to him in humility. Doesn't even say he has to come and see his servant, thinks he can heal him remotely. 'Nowhere,' says Jesus, 'have I seen faith like this.' That approach is extraordinary. Who is there that you exercise authority over, that you have some influence over or even power over. Who is there in your life that you could turn the tables on like this? Approach them with humility, awe, ready to learn? You may be approaching Christ.

And Jesus's response is equally shocking. These are the hated occupiers. The oppressors, the ones who ritually humiliate, coerce, the cruel ones. Even though this particular soldier had donated funds to help build a synagogue, still...you don't want to help them...you want to destroy them.

There's sometimes a pattern in Jesus's ministry where he opposes fiercely the systems that hurt people. He's really sharp about religious abuses or political overreaching. But to individuals, even to the individuals who are part of the system he opposes, he is open-hearted, ready to heal and help.

Jesus remains free from the prejudicial damning of whole groups, even the army, even the army that was making his life daily difficult, as it was for all Jews living under Roman occupation.

So how is Luke trying to communicate with us in giving us these stories and deeply counter-cultural conversations about Jesus?

You will have heard me before say that I think of Scripture not so much as a set of translated sentences in a book, but as a musical score. Like the score of JS Bach's 'St John Passion'. There are some bits which have been set for whole crowds to sing. There are some melodies that are haunting and some rhythms that are invigorating. But if it just remains a score, then it is as silent as the pages it's written on.

This Scripture has to be played and sung by us in our daily lives: lived, argued with, puzzled over, practised. If there's a bit I just don't get, then just like a singer, I will take a deep breath, put my head up, stand my ground, and sing it again.

Like Luke's gospel people, you will be here for many different reasons this morning. You will have travelled different distances, in different frames of mind. Some of you are feeling like today's a good day, others of you might be feeling that your distress will never end.

Luke's gospel tells us that whoever we are, whatever the circumstances of our lives, *Change's gonna come*. And for those who have ears to hear, like the civil rights campaigners in Charlottesville, or the grieving families in Sierra Leone, like those dealing with life altering injuries in Barcelona, or those whose Grenfell Tower grief is immeasurable, or like my two breakfast companions, staying strong and dignified while they worry that their one precious life is wasting away. For those who have ears to hear, radical change, metanoia, change of mindset and change of heart...it can't come too soon.