



Sunday, 30 October 2022

Evensong for All Saints and Black History Month

Isaiah 65.17-end; Hebrews 11.32-12.2

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'It's a long way home to the mountaintop, but we must keep on walking towards hope'

May I speak in the name of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

"What we witnessed that night was hellish, absolutely frightful, something I never thought I would ever see," Protopsaltis told the journalist. "The sea was howling, the wind was howling, the waves were just so big and all these people down there in that rocky cove, trying to keep steady, trying somehow to get into the bag, sometimes two at a time but mostly one at a time, so the crane could lift them to the top".¹

These are the words of 66-year-old, Michalis Protopsaltis, "the construction company owner [who] dispatched a crane to the Kythira clifftop and, one by one, began saving the 80 Afghan immigrants scrambling for dear life in the waters below... Further east on the day of the shipwreck, the bodies of 16 young African women were found floating off Lesbos".² Protopsaltis refused to see himself as a hero and is instead haunted by the faces and cries of those who did not survive.

The level and anguish of human suffering is sometimes too hard to bear and beyond our imagination, given the relative comfort of our own homes. We are left wondering how humans can be so exploitative. In this instance, the vessel that was meant for 15 people had been carrying 95. It ran aground off Kythria, which is in the Peloponnese 250 miles west of Turkey. We are forced to recognise our helplessness in the face of such inhumanity.

Yet we read in Isaiah:

I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress (Isaiah 65: 19).

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¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/23/greek-builder-saved-80-afghans-the-sea-athens>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/23/greek-builder-saved-80-afghans-the-sea-athens>

I don't know about you, but it feels like it has been a mild autumn so far. So, I guess that with my winter coat, and fedora-esque wool hat, and mask, you might say that I have been a bit overdressed.

Maybe that's been the assessment of the numerous assistants by the self-checkout tills at M&S in Moorgate, who have chosen to stand behind me as I paid and placed the bought items in my rucksack. Maybe I just looked rather dapper, and they wanted my autograph or a selfie. Or maybe they thought I looked like Beyoncé. On these occasions of close supervision, I have been the only black person paying at the time. How often has this happened to you, I wonder? Because it has happened four times to me in recent weeks. I am now wondering how many more times it will happen.

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Last Thursday, "the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) said girls and boys with afro-textured hair or hairstyles were disproportionately affected by discrimination and warned it could have serious and long-lasting consequences for them and their families...Schools are being warned not to penalise or exclude pupils for wearing their hair in natural afro styles, as well as braids, cornrows and plaits, in new guidance intended to prevent hair discrimination".³

So, when people argue over the fact that there is no systematic racism in this country, I can only ask whether they have been removed from their education because of the way they looked.

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The feast of All Saints falling with the last few days of Black History Month means that two worlds collide: the cosmic realm of the divine, as presented in the new creation detailed in Isaiah 65:17 onwards and the brutal and often unavoidable reality of the suffering and pain of truth-telling and truth-seeking as recalled by the writer in Hebrew 11: 32 and the following verses.

For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind (Isaiah 65:17)

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/oct/27/schools-in-great-britain-warned-not-to-ban-minority-pupils-hair-styles>

They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the LORD (Isaiah 65:25).

This is the destination, and this is the place that has been promised for all. The question is how do we get there, to this home of rejoicing on the holy mountain? And which god do we follow home.

In the recently released film 'Amsterdam' two soldiers, veterans of the horrors of WWI are talking. One says the other, in referring to his poor choice of wife, and the reason he returned to the US after the war, and whose family is antisemitic: "you followed the wrong god home". The film is a subtle and sometimes frightening interrogation of the rise of white supremacy in the inter-war years of the early 20th century both in the United States and Europe. It came to mind as I wrote this sermon because on Friday, "Hannah Goslar, one of Anne Frank's best friends died aged 93. Goslar was born in 1928. Her family fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and settled in Amsterdam, where she met Frank at school."⁴ They were reunited in the Nazi concentration camp, Bergen-Belsen.

We must never forget, we cannot turn our eyes away, we should remember that we are in the march of the saints. With the news of unspeakable war crimes in the Ukraine, *yet speak them we must*, it really is a long way home to the mountaintop, but we must keep on walking towards hope.

The ITV drama 'The Walk-In' has been a sobering watch. It is "the true story of how a Neo-Nazi plan to kill an MP was foiled by an inside man".⁵ This deathly plan was inspired by, and followed the murder of, MP Jo Cox in June 2016. The actor Stephen Graham is superlative in the drama. It is a terrifying but also a useful reminder that "in recent years the most severe threats to the country's national security feature people planning atrocities linked to extreme right-wing ideology".⁶ It's not the brown and black people in our country that we have to worry about.

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Which god are we following to the mountain top? Which god are we following home? Because we are all following something. Whether it is ambitious or power, or fear, or deep insecurity, or popularity, or the need to be needed, and the need to be wanted. Whatever we follow is linked to how we see ourselves and how we internalise the way the world sees us.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/28/hannah-goslar-anne-franks-friend-and-holocaust-survivor-dies-aged-93>

⁵ <https://www.itv.com/presscentre/press-releases/itv-commissions-true-story-walk-starring-stephen-graham>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/may/16/terrorism-in-the-uk-the-rising-threat-of-far-right-extremists>

I am not sure whether it was for procrastination, inspiration or to make up the lack of steps I had done this week, but I spent 3 minutes or so yesterday dancing to Louis Armstrong's 1938 recording of 'When the Saints Go Marching In'. I defy you not to dance when you listen to it later. It was in those moments between glorious brass and my mismatched steps, that I remembered that I am not alone in this. I am not alone in the dance towards home. We are not alone in the march into a more compassionate and inclusive reality. Some have marched before us, and some will march on after us. It's not just us in this:

Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy (Hebrews 11.35-38).

To be a saint, the letter to the Hebrews suggests, involves quite a lot of suffering and endurance. It is not a label granted to you because you were good, but rather because you were *visible*. The kind of visibility that having afro hair in a classroom brings. The kind of visibility that means you are stopped by the police because you drive a car that is too good, and that you *couldn't possibly* afford. The kind of visibility that unsteadies people when you speak well or refer to culture and Art and history that is supposed to be beyond you, for whatever reason. The kind of visibility that having a different identity brings. But we cannot apologise for that, nor should we.

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Cranach's painting entitled 'St Maurice' is resplendent having been restored in recent years. It portrays, we are told, one of the first black saints and is housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Cranach's work depicts St Maurice as a black man, echoing the story that he was from the African continent. Maurice became a martyr for refusing to kill other Christians in the 3rd century. In this 16th century representation, he is dressed as knight, his apparel filled with symbols of the Holy Roman Empire and his military status. His afro can be proudly seen under an impressive red hat. Cranach's work sits among the tradition of black faces and bodies within Renaissance paintings and artefacts. It challenges the notion of presence, of who is there, *who has always been there*, who should be there and who should not. St Maurice is *visible*.

And is that not what this has always been about? Who should be in a classroom and who should not. Who should be at the table and who should not. Who deserves to die in stretches of water between continental Europe and the UK, and who should not. Who should be in this country and who should not.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12: 1-2).

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Running is simply not possible when you are being crushed by unjust systems, and when you have to decide between feeding your child and keeping them warm. Yet, we hold on to the fact that others walk alongside us, and Jesus has walked ahead of us. And those behind us are also seeking the mountain top, and we must not falter in our commitment to the light that shines on suffering, and makes it known. We must not falter in our commitment to the light that shines on the faces of those who have been written out of the march; we must not falter so that justice and healing can be found.

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Amen.