

**5<sup>th</sup> November 2023, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday before Advent**

*Micah 3:5-12; Psalm 107:1-9; I Thessalonians 2:9-13; Matthew 24: 1-14*

“Remember, remember the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, Gunpowder, treason and plot...”

I remember my very first experience of Bonfire Night, aged 3. My dad took me to a village bonfire on the edge of Dartmoor where we lived. I can remember being terrified. Darkness, sudden bangs, out of control small boys letting off jumping jacks all around us, and the whoosh of rockets that didn't always go where they were supposed to. Even the bonfire, and I loved bonfires, was too big and suddenly scary with the seemingly uncontrollable force of fire. I cried. I was a sad disappointment to my dad who told me, not for the only time, that I should have been a boy.... I just wanted to go home, back to a place of security, light and background warmth – not the searing heat of the bonfire flames.

If that's how I felt at a friendly celebration, whatever must the children of Gaza be feeling? I watch them on the television news. I can't bear to see them – covered in dust, broken and dead. They have nowhere to go to be safe; no homes offering security, warmth and nurture. Because it has all been destroyed. And the bangs are not just fireworks, but the explosion of bombs and gunfire, all genuinely life-threatening.

If the original gunpowder plot had succeeded, the 36 barrels of gunpowder concealed beneath Parliament would have blown the House of Lords and all within it for the state opening in 1605, off the face of the earth. Robert Catesby and his fellow Jesuit plotters, including Guy Fawkes, (the one found guarding the gunpowder), hatched this scheme because they wanted three things: to kill the king, to revive the Catholic faith and to prevent England's union with Scotland. James 1 of England (VI of Scotland) passionately wanted union between the kingdoms of England and Scotland. Talk of such a union

unleashed the forces of nationalism and xenophobia on both sides, and amongst the objections of English MPs at the time was the warning that such a union would provoke a “deluge of Scots” across the border. Attitudes don’t seem to have changed much since then, as the Home Secretary a few weeks ago warned us of “a hurricane of migrants...” The same inflammatory language is there, the same xenophobic attitudes – just different times and contexts. When you add religion into the mix, things can become seriously toxic. Protestant supporters of James 1 approved his persecution of Catholics. The Catholic community had had enough. Their hatred of Protestants had reached killing point.

Were those Jesuit plotters evil people? They certainly planned to carry out an evil action in their intention to kill indiscriminately. Many people would brand them as terrorists. They almost certainly fulfil the criteria. Perhaps they were the false prophets of their day with a message of independence both nationally and religiously, leading people away from the king’s vision of a marriage between kingdoms. But that same king demanded a divorce when it came to the practice of the Christian faith. His kingdom was to be a Protestant kingdom with no place for Catholicism.

“Fight the good fight” this morning’s final hymn exhorts us. But what is the good fight? The hymn makes it clear that the fight is Christian, but for centuries there have been so many versions of Christianity. How is the choice made? In 17<sup>th</sup> century England the choice was starkly Protestant or Catholic. Now the choice is vast and we have a never-ending array of other faiths to choose from too. The age-old differences between Jew and Arab predominate again in the Middle East. On 7<sup>th</sup> October, Hamas, officially a terrorist group, was responsible for the largest number of innocent Jewish deaths since the Holocaust, so it’s not hard to see a just cause in Israel’s fight back. Israel’s intention to

eliminate Hamas is also understandable. But the Just War theory has throughout the centuries preached proportionality. It's hard to see the thousands of deaths in Gaza, including so many women and children, as being proportionate. "Cease fire" the headlines shriek, and at the very least surely the humanitarian aid convoys must be allowed through. Is Hamas evil? How do they compare with the gunpowder plotters? Are there false prophets mixed up in all this? For most of us on the sidelines it is almost impossible to identify with the passionate nationalism that promotes such hatred. We simply know that such hatred threatens humanity. As Jesus says in today's gospel, "Because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold." Tragically, love seems to have left today's scenario altogether, not just grown cold.

Today's gospel speaks of war, hatred, betrayal and violence. It's a frightening picture against our present-day background of Palestine and Israel. Jesus says these things will happen and they do happen, they have happened. By the time Matthew wrote his gospel, the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. Matthew writes of Jesus' predictions with the knowledge of hindsight. Several hundred years before Jesus, the prophet Micah was predicting the destruction of Jerusalem. The same cycle of destruction repeats itself. Micah's message is about social injustice. The false prophets of his day preach a message solely determined by their wages. They should be guardians of justice, but they prophesy falsely to serve their own ends. Their foolish complacency will bring disaster on Jerusalem. They imagine that the presence of the temple on Mount Zion will protect them from all evil. "No harm will come upon us" they cry. But Micah says: "Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height." They have deserved this. They have brought it on themselves.

These holy sites and especially the holy buildings stand as immensely powerful symbols in all times and in all places. They stand for goodness and holiness, for all that is best in humanity aspiring towards God through beauty and structural grandeur. They can be seen for miles around, places of sanctuary, somewhere you can flee to for safety as so many did in Gaza. There people fled in their hundreds to the Greek Orthodox Church of St Porphyrios, only to be killed in the fearsome air strikes of October 20<sup>th</sup>. People of rival faiths and cultures see these buildings as statements of foreign beliefs, and symbols of all that they hate and fear. Nowhere is safe, not even great houses of God.

Cycles of violence and destruction come round continually. The temple is destroyed, nations and kingdoms destroy each other, cycles of poverty and deprivation increase, not just because of wars and violence. Micah spoke out against social injustice, and we continue to live with social injustice today. Last week ITN ran a brief series on homelessness which shockingly reminded me of that 1966 Play for Today, "Cathy come home", depicting the inevitable downward spiral for a young mother with small children. We may not have bombs and gunfire in this country, but our streets are frightening places and offer no security, warmth and comfort of the homes we take for granted. We have made no improvement since 1966. Cycles of poverty and deprivation go on.

As we approach Advent we traditionally look to the last things and to death. But as Christians, we look in hope. Jesus says at the end of today's gospel: "Anyone who endures to the end will be saved." The NT scholar, John Fenton says that for endurance we should read hope, and our hope is contained within the good news of the coming kingdom to which we look as Advent approaches. Jesus says that the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, it will embrace us all. Today we not only look forward to Advent; we are still within

the season that reminds us of those who have died – All Saints, All Souls and still to come, Remembrance Sunday. Last week Dr Charles Moseley wrote a most beautiful article in the Church Times in which he encourages us to see the past (including the lives of the saints and all those we have lost), the present (with all our despair and fear), and the future (when God's kingdom reigns), gathered into one – past, present and still to come. We cannot undo the past: we carry it with us, we inherit it and we ask forgiveness. In this Eucharist we are, now, in the present "the body of Christ", as Moseley says "interdependent, one with another, in something far larger than our little selves." He says that "the whole pattern of the observable universe.... is a pattern of constant death and rebirth." And for the future, I quote: "I try to grasp that this is the beautiful, mysterious goodness, wholeness, aliveness that surrounds us... I try to grasp that it is into this aliveness that all of us, all creation, will be taken up in a homecoming, a reunion, a celebration.... Where each completed, unique self, will find its journey's end."

Most importantly of all, given my subject matter today, he says that we share in the glory, the heroism and the generosity that humans have achieved – and will achieve again. We share the guilt of Belsen and of Gaza, but also the glory of Bach and the blessedness of Bonhoeffer; glory as well as grief; holiness as well as horror. Both opposites are true, says Moseley and in Christ they don't cancel each other out, they include one another. Christ's risen body bore his wounds, marks of pain and suffering. Resurrection does not magic all the nastiness away. Grief and joy, horror and delight are all true and all part of the resurrection story. We pray in the words of today's post-communion collect that sharing fellowship with saints and angels "we may come to share their joy in heaven", where God will wipe away all tears and where death will be swallowed up in victory. Amen.

