

Reflective Worship for Holy Week
Wednesday 5th April 2023

Caleb's story, part 2

Matthew 16:13-17 & 20

Wednesday came. I sat and wondered how I'd ended up as part of that wild and unworldly procession three days earlier. Me – whose motto was “work, worship, and watch what you say.” There'd been none of that going on, I can tell you. All I can say is that, with Jesus all things had seemed possible that day.

But today. How do things seem today? Here, on the edge?

The day after the procession I went to see Lazarus. But he wasn't there. “Away, visiting relatives,” Martha told me. Quite firmly I thought.

“He's had a hard time,” whispered Mary. “He was getting threats from people.”

A neighbour saw me leave. He looked troubled.

“Can't help thinking that if Jesus hadn't delayed his return and had come to heal Lazarus before he died, then all this could have been avoided,” he said.

I muttered something in reply and left, but inside I was shaken. Had that been why Miriam had been so odd when I'd made a comment about Jesus not being there when Lazarus was so ill? Had Jesus deliberately delayed coming back? Had he let Lazarus die? So Jesus could raise him again? It made no sense. Why would he do that?

I couldn't get it all out of my mind. Whilst I was with Miriam and the others who had been there when Lazarus was raised, and those who had taken part in the procession, I could clearly remember that sense of joy, of new beginnings, of hope. I felt alive!

Or was that just “getting carried away”? Was I just being swept along on the enthusiasm of others? Others who, to be honest, I wouldn't otherwise have had much time for? They weren't exactly the most prominent people in the synagogue. In fact, several of them had quite dubious reputations. Like that tax-collector fellow, Zacchaeus. What was a law-abiding fellow like me doing associating with the likes of him?

Except..... that when Zacchaeus spoke of Jesus, and how his life had been completely changed when Jesus noticed him, called him out of the tree, trusted and welcomed him – well, then I remembered that moment when Jesus had looked at me. His warmth. His welcome. All that mercy, peace, justice and love. Surely if the Living God came and walked on this earth, this is what we would see.

The thoughts went round and round in my head. It was as if light and dark were at war within me.

And then, today I had a visit – from the leader of our synagogue and his ‘colleague’. The synagogue leader looked uncomfortable. The colleague looked – and sounded – like some middle rank religious official.

“This sinner, Jesus of Nazareth...” he began, “we have reason to believe that it was your donkey he rode into the city earlier this week.”

It was a statement, not a question. I saw no need to reply.

“Your friend here has vouched for you being a sincere and God-fearing man, so we are prepared to assume that the donkey was taken without your permission - on this occasion. But we thought it wise that I should come and warn you of the type of rabble you may be in danger of associating with.”

The threat was barely veiled.

He went on and on – spouting all the stuff I would have expected. All the stuff Miriam and I had discussed in fact. About the importance of a rigid interpretation of the Law. About the consequences of not following the Law to the letter. Reminders of the Exile. Hints of Jesus’ followers being put out of the synagogues. Then more, about how Jesus’ teaching was subversive and dangerous to the nation. The delicate balance between the religious leadership and the Roman authorities. The risk of riots – and the consequences of Roman retribution.

And all through this, I was comparing his attitude of aggression and control with the steadfast stillness and peace of Jesus, and thinking that I knew which I preferred.

But then, his parting shot.

“And, if you don’t take my word for it, I suggest you pay attention to what he’s preaching now. Never mind peace and wishy-washiness – he’s threatening the Temple, and making himself out to be God Almighty Himself. It’s blasphemy, and we will not – can not - allow it to go on any longer.”

And with that, he stormed out.

“Pah! Nonsense,” I thought as he left.

But the thought had taken hold.

I took myself out and about. Kept my ears open. Down in the city, groups of people were talking about how Jesus had completely wrong-footed the religious authorities at every turn. “Held up their hypocrisy to them like a mirror,” one person put it, “but they couldn’t see it.”

No wonder the authorities were doing all they could to get rid of him.

But other things too. Something about an altercation between Jesus and the authorities just after he'd thrown the money-changers out of the Temple. About it being destroyed and Jesus rebuilding it in three days. The Temple is the dwelling place of God – how could a man of God speak of it being destroyed? And as for rebuilding it in three days – surely that was delusional bravado. It's massive. It would take the lifetimes of many men to restore it to its current glory.

And then something about private meetings between Jesus and his closest followers. Predictions of Jesus receiving the kingship and majesty of God himself, of the destruction of Jerusalem, of Jesus coming in power and glory to judge the world, and of his followers being prepared for when all this happened.

Did Jesus really believe this? Say this? It would put him on a par with the One True God himself. Surely no sane person would say such a thing. It was as close to blasphemy as makes no difference. Was he mad? Possessed?

No – it couldn't be. This wasn't what I'd seen when I saw Jesus. I'd seen welcome, goodness, peace – not self-promotion and arrogance.

And yet, there was a ring of truth in the words of the man who told me. Big guy. Hands like a fisherman. A 'no nonsense sort'. I couldn't see him either making all this up, or passing on idle gossip.

My head was spinning.

I am a man who prides himself on staying on the edge. Making sound judgements based on evidence. Not getting carried away.

I needed space to think.

The thoughts jostled backwards and forwards, forwards and backwards all the way back up the Mount of Olives to Bethphage.

I stood in the sunset and looked out over the city, the Temple dominating the skyline. The heart of our nation. The heart of our faith. Although the sky was clear, it felt as if storm-clouds were gathering.

Who was this Jesus?

Was he the one with the quiet authority to turn lives around, heal the blind, raise the dead, reach out to me with love and mercy and acceptance? The one who seemed to live out all I understand of the God I've tried to follow all my life?

Or beneath that compelling exterior was he so self-deluded that he thought he was God? That despite being able to heal, he had deliberately stayed away from Bethany until Lazarus was dead? That he had put his sisters, not to mention Lazarus himself, through all that – just

for some 'raising him from the dead' stunt? So full of his own importance that he was bent on revolution and overthrowing our state, our faith – even Rome itself for all I know?

Or was he – well, try as I might, I just couldn't think of a third alternative. Something which would hold these two opposing views together.

Even my emotions seemed at war with each other now. Frustration, vying with deep peace, pitted against a growing anger.

"Well, Caleb," I said to myself. "Looks like you can't stay on the edge much longer. Either Jesus is a blasphemer whose delusional self-belief will lead him and his followers to disaster, or he is the Chosen One of God."

The night closed in.

"And it seems as if, very soon, you are going to have to decide which he is."

Reflection:

So, "who do you say I am? "

Peter got the word right – Messiah – but it was probably only as the post-resurrection events unfolded that he understood what the role of the Messiah was to be. Not just to "restore Israel", but to open the way back to relationship with God for anyone who would accept the invitation.

The most powerful – certainly the most vociferous – religious leaders thought they knew exactly who Jesus was. Depending on their own perspective they saw either someone who was leading the people astray spiritually, compromising on the Law which they saw as the way to honour and worship God; or someone who would compromise the fragile 'understanding' between them and their Roman overlords, leading to brutal clampdown and suppression of their religion. Either way, a dangerous maverick. They knew the Scriptures so well, yet could only read them in the narrow way to which they were accustomed, and so missed the bigger picture of God in Jesus.

What about Caleb? We left him torn between two views of Jesus – maverick or Messiah. But with a sense that he might be missing something. A bigger picture perhaps, that would make sense of all that he had seen, heard, and experienced.

And what about us? Who do we say Jesus is? The New Testament is full of 'pictures' of Jesus – king, brother, friend, comforter, saviour, redeemer, challenger, suffering servant, the holy one; which our various cultures have then interpreted in their own ways.

We each have our own unique understanding of who Jesus is – but how expansive is it? Have we become comfortable and familiar with just one understanding, so that we miss

part of what Jesus is about? Or are we, like Caleb, still searching for a bigger picture – a picture that will do more justice to who the Son of God really is?

We've got some images of Jesus here. Take some time to ponder them.

- Which is closest to the way you 'see' Jesus?
- Which depict Jesus in an unfamiliar way that make you think?
- Are there any that make you feel uncomfortable? Why?

If none of the images work for you, then call some to mind that will, and use them instead.

How can you use them to contribute to giving you a bigger picture of God in Jesus?

OR

Which option do you think Caleb chose?

Why?

What about you?