

Lent 5 Passion Year A, second readings
Lamentations 3:19-33
Matthew 20:17-34

by Rod Prince

None so blind as those who do not wish to see.

Tonight's readings are variously about those who chose to be blind being forced to see, those who are blind because they fail to understand what they see, and those who are truly blind and wish to see.

Let us begin with the first reading tonight from the Book of Lamentations. Written around the time of the destruction of the temple in 586BC it is a book worthy of a Dan Brown conspiracy novel. Comprising five poems, one per chapter, it has an unusual structure. Chapters 1, 2 and 4 are written in acrostics, each poem has 22 verses corresponding to the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The first line begins with the first letter of the alphabet the second with the second and so on. Chapter 3 or poem 3 from which tonight's reading comes has 66 lines each letter of the alphabet being the first letter of three lines and Chapter 5 is not acrostic but has 22 lines. No one knows why Chapter five deviates from the pattern, perhaps the writer grew bored.

Chapter 1 likens the destroyed city to a desperate widow overcome by misery
Chapter 2 links the miseries experienced to national sins and acts of God
Chapter 3 from which we read tonight speaks of hope for the people of God
Chapter 4 laments the ruin of the city and temple and links these misfortunes to the sins of the people (finally an acknowledgement of personal fault)
Chapter 5 is a prayer that Zion's reproach may be removed through the repentance and recovery of the people; one might say a recovery of vision.

In the CofE the readings are used at Morning and Evening prayer on Monday and Tuesday of Holy Week and at Evening prayer on Good Friday. Some of you will also recognise a section of tonight's reading from the opening scriptural sentences of the funeral service as the coffin is brought into the church or the crematorium and from the opening part of the Remembrance Day service.

The Book is the collective recognition of a nation who were intentionally blind to their failings and who now are forced to see the consequences of their actions. They have failed to live as God called them to do. They have failed to be that light to lighten the gentiles. As the chosen people of God they have failed in their calling to be the example to the rest of the world; a calling which gave them their unique status. Their failure has led to their present predicament.

So The Book of Lamentations is a nadir in the life of the Jewish people; a rock-bottom moment when all that one can do is to be honest about oneself and the reasons for one's plight. It is a moment when one no longer has the luxury of choosing to be blind because survival demands that one sees the world around you as it truly is. Little wonder that these readings emerge during a nadir in the Christian year. Holy Week, the week in the year when we can no longer choose to be blind to the consequences of the worst attributes of humanity. The Evening of Good Friday, the lowest point of the year for Christians, when we realise that it is too late to reverse the effects of our failure to love when we recognise that the consequence of our actions is to put to death God who gave us life. There comes a time or times in most of our lives when we are forced to recognise the consequences of our actions or inaction; when we no longer have the luxury of shutting our eyes; of being blind by choice.

Our Second Reading tonight sees Jesus advancing towards the cross. Every step he takes is a step nearer the most agonising death that man has ever devised. God knows we are not short of imagination in that area. Jesus is burdened with the knowledge that his vision brings. He sees all too clearly his fate even though those around him do not. He is like a man on death

row who has exhausted every appeal process. He tries, in vain, to share his burden with his disciples, who fail to see what he is talking about. The extent of their lack of understanding is demonstrated by the fact that the Mother of two of them, James and John, is moved to believe that far from Jesus staring death in the face, he is on the verge of taking power and that now is the time to start lobbying for the top positions.

The frustration felt by Jesus leaps from the page. Time is running out and yet you do not understand. To enter my Kingdom you must turn the received wisdom of the world on its head. If you wish to lead you must serve. If you want to rule you must be a slave to others and if you want to be great you must be the least of all. His twelve disciples who have been his closest companions, seen his acts of healing, heard his teaching, had the meanings of the parables revealed to them, are, despite his best efforts get them to see, still blind to the vision he has come to proclaim.

Ironically, as he journeys towards Jerusalem with a group of followers who can see but yet are blind to the truth Jesus encounters two men who recognise the truth yet cannot see. No wonder Jesus took compassion on these men. In a re-run of the encounter he has just had with the mother of James and John he asks the blind men "What do you want me to do for you?" They do not want power or riches or worldly gain they simply ask to be granted the gift of vision; to fully experience the world around them. I wonder if Jesus, as he touched the eyes of those two blind men and gave them sight, wished his disciples could receive the vision of the Kingdom of God.

But he knew that he and they had not reached their nadir, their rock bottom moment. That was still ahead, still to come. His disciples still had the luxury of choosing not to see, to ignore the warning signs, hoping all would be well. Good Friday was still far off.

Many of us, myself included, spend much of our lives choosing not to see. We are intentionally blind to the suffering of others, to our faults and the consequences of our actions. Lent is a time when we force ourselves to face up to what otherwise we shut our eyes to; our failings, our lack of love and lack of faith. Without the hope of the risen Jesus the impact of opening our eyes to our true self, to our sins and the sin of the world would be unbearable. We would see only desolation and despair but as the writer of Lamentations reminds us:

But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.
His mercies never come to an end.
They are new every morning.
Great is your faithfulness.
"The Lord is my portion" says my soul
Therefore I will hope in him.

Lent is both a time to renew our vision and a season of hope. Amen