

Sunday Homily

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

13 MARCH 2022

YEAR C

“Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day
I must be on my way.”
Luke 13:33

Illustration

Today’s passage from Luke’s Gospel is sometimes known as the “Lament for Jerusalem”, and it is the inspiration for the English composer Sir John Tavener’s work of the same name. It is written in the English choral style and was first performed in 2003. Tavener’s *Lament* incorporates Christian, Jewish and Muslim influences. As the music rises in a crescendo of “cosmic laments” it takes on layers of meaning. One influence is “The rivers of Babylon”, that mournful psalm sung by the Israelite exiles in Babylon. Another part is drawn from the Islamic poet Rumi’s poem, *Masnavi*. Through its Jewish and Muslim references, the *Lament* becomes a heartfelt appeal for understanding, tolerance and love. And it reaches through the years to become a lament for modern Jerusalem – still the focus of so much religious and political strife. It is a universal lament, as human voices strive to create a divine sound, echoing the longing which all human beings feel so deeply – the longing to reach God, which lies at the heart of our every feeling, thought and action. The composer has described the work as “a love song, lamenting our banishment from home”; and, of course, our true home is with God.

Gospel Teaching

Just imagine that somebody told you your life was threatened by a powerful man – someone you knew had the clout and influence to carry out that threat. Anyone might be forgiven for fleeing to save their skin, abandoning any sense of a higher purpose, or a job left unfinished. But when the Pharisees tell Jesus that Herod wants to kill him, he is undaunted. Instead he stands his ground in defiance, and even throws a vivid insult Herod’s way: “that fox”.

Then comes one of those spine-tingling moments, which takes on a particular resonance in Lent: “on the third day I finish my work”. There was so much going on during the ministry of Jesus, to those around him it must sometimes have seemed to be a dizzy whirl of miracles and parables. And doubtless they did not – could not – pick up on the true significance of his words: “on the third day”. But hindsight is a wonderful thing and we, two thousand years later, have a privileged insight into the full meaning of what Jesus said.

But then, out of the blue, Jesus seems to crumble into grief. But why? What has got to him? Surely it's not Herod's threat – his faith in God's purpose remains absolutely unshaken. So is it really Jerusalem that Jesus is lamenting? The city certainly did, and still does, have special significance, and moves people to strong feelings. But above that, there is something universal in what Jesus says, as though Jerusalem were a symbol for all human failing and cruelty.

Perhaps, more than Herod's words, more than Jerusalem's flaws, Jesus is suffering under the weight of a burden he carries within. For, though he knows that Herod's immediate threat is empty, he also knows that he will face death before long. It must have been so lonely at times, knowing what was to come, while everyone around him treated his ministry like a party, and he the life and soul of it all.

Application

It's all too easy to see Jesus as an abstract symbol of divinity. That he was "fully human and fully divine" is a paradox we have to take on faith, but here, surely, is a glimpse of his true humanity. It reminds us that Jesus really did become flesh and blood, and experienced those emotions that we all do – grief, loss, yearning, fear, doubt.

The theologian Paul Tillich said: "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith." And there is nothing shameful, weak or wrong in doubting, or even crumbling. What would be damaging would be to hide or deny it. Sir John Tavener interprets the lament for Jerusalem as a moment when Jesus loses sight of God, but he also sees that loss as temporary. For while Jesus knows he will suffer and die, he also knows that the third day will follow. When we are adrift on a swirling sea of uncertainty, we don't need to cling to a raft of conviction. On the contrary, if we let ourselves go into our fears and doubts, we are demonstrating an even greater faith: faith that God will ultimately find us and set us again on dry land.