

A sermon preached at St Andrew Dacre, Cumbria for the World Marmalade Festival

The second Sunday of Lent

Sunday 17th March 2019

The Revd George Bush, Rector of St Mary-le-Bow

As Lent advances the Gospel today introduces us to two elements in what will be the decisive conflict of the Passion of Jesus; Herod the king and Jerusalem the city. It would perhaps be truer to say that both are essential; they contribute to our salvation story.

Herod (which is more of a family than a personal name) is not Herod the Great who got himself appointed king of Judea by the Romans. That Herod, who we know as massacring innocent infants in a vain attempt to encompass the death of the baby Jesus – that Herod was a brazen Romaniser, a half-Jew who, to the distaste of the Jewish people introduced Roman games to Jerusalem which they all thought impious. Herod the Great was responsible for the vast classical style Jewish Temple which was still a building site at the time of Jesus and whose foundation stones can be seen today. But he went down in history as a hedonist and a tyrant.

Today's Gospel's Herod is one of the Great's sons - amongst whom he divided his kingdom and was known as Antipas. Nothing like as fearsome as his father but still more Roman than Jewish. He it was who, fascinated by John the Baptist had him imprisoned and, on a whim had him beheaded to please his guests. For his part in the trial of Jesus, Herod was destined in Christian mythology to ride around in a perpetual winter or in the abandonment of hell with Pontius Pilate as his best mate. Clearly Jesus didn't much care for him either, as my book tells me that 'fox' is pretty much an insult; probably it was what everyone called him!

And we also have Jerusalem. When General Allenby captured Jerusalem as part of the destruction of the Ottoman empire in 1917, he received a telegram from the Foreign Office stating simply of his entry into the city, 'strongly suggest dismount'. Perhaps of all cities this has been the holiest of all in the earth's history.

For the Jews of the time of Jesus the Temple at the centre of the city was the guarantor of their relationship with God. It marked the place where the world was created, where Abraham was required to sacrifice his son Isaac, where the ark of the covenant rested and where there was a passage through the sky into the heavenly presence of God directly from the little room, the Holy of Holies. Sacrifices of dead animals could only be offered there and these offerings were a route to a safe relationship with God for individuals and for the nation.

Of course Jerusalem was so much more – a place of political power and trading advantage. But essentially it was a religious centre and the Romans risked disturbance and unrest if they upset the delicate balance of Jewish sensitivities (particularly with regard to idols) and Roman devices. We know that Jesus loved the place – he was offered as a first born son in the Temple, he got lost there as a child, he visited as an itinerant preacher, healed in and around the Temple, taught there, sought to defend the poor by overturning the tables and in today's Gospel lamenting what was lacking in this place which was for him and so many the very centre of the earth and of all that mattered in life.

It was to Herod's palace in Jerusalem that Pilate sent Jesus hoping to pass the buck when some of the Jews had secured his arrest. Herod was in Jerusalem for the Passover and Pilate will perhaps have known that he was intrigued by Jesus as he had been by John. But Herod got no further with questioning Jesus and impatiently sent him back to Pilate. It is said that from being enemies the incident turned them into friends.

What of course is telling is that Jesus although faced with terrible consequences and real mental and physical torture says almost nothing in his defence. This silence used to disturb me until I realised that if Jesus had offered some extenuation, some criticism of the evidence he would have totally given into the provisional character of all human judgement and endorsed the authority of his judges.

So Herod and Jerusalem are given to us as hard power and Jesus declines to collaborate with its claims. It is very easy for ancient institutions such as the Church to give in to the seductions of hard power – of declaration, coercion and enforcement – indeed that has been our history almost from the start. But there is another way.

Writing of the launch of this year's marmalade awards at the Japanese Embassy, a Foreign Office boffin commented that these awards have their 'spiritual' home here at Dalemian as well as their physical home. 'Spiritual' is a very curious word in the context but it is, to my mind wholly justified. Seemingly the Mayor of the Japanese city of Yawatahama, the centre of citrus growing there, spoke about how an innocent, seemingly obscure activity such as marmalade making can connect peoples and cultures. 'You can love people through marmalade' he said. 'This is citizen soft power' writes the boffin, 'the product of individual passions and not something governments can or should attempt to steer, although we can celebrate it.'

I hazard that no one in on the start of this extraordinary festival would have imagined that it would be commended as a tool of international relations. Relations note not politics. For is it where we discover things in common, little things, marginal activities, communities of interest that we deny that only hard power matters, only hard power accomplishes.

It's a big leap from soft fruit to soft power; and only the food historians amongst us will know whether we can assume the Herod, Pilate and even perhaps Jesus would have known marmalade. Plainly oranges would have been plentiful. Jesus eschews hard power and declines to be a king; rather he leads by gentle steps and encouraging gestures; he involves himself with individuals and groups and he indicates that the signs of the kingdom will be there and not elsewhere. We are not to imagine what he might make of this festival; but we can perhaps guess.