

You are not alone

Philippians 3:17-4:1; NIV; Luke 13:31-35

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This is a story about voices and about community.

I wanted to start today by singing *Jerusalem* but I was afraid the irony would have been lost. It is a great hymn but if you look at it closely, the hymn conflates an idolised view of the perfect Jerusalem with hope and courage and the UK's heavenly landscapes. None of things are right for today, in this place.

That is not what Jesus is saying when he says, 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you kill the prophets and stone those sent to you...'

Jerusalem was, and continues to be a city divided. The city that housed God's temple also houses a persistent refusal to hear God's word. It is a city, like any city, full of diverse and competing voices but this city has a marked Biblical history as just that.

There are many ambiguities in the passage which I would like to dive into a little but not lost in the minutiae is hints of conflict. Both these things become important.

First, let's look at the voices. The Pharisees come to Jesus and say 'leave this place' because Herod wants to kill him. But Luke (unlike some of the other writings) is quite neutral on the Pharisees. They have a job to do. So, given their relationship, they may well have simply wanted to protect Jesus from Herod's cruelty. But Herod, in some writings, is curious about Jesus and has not made up his mind to do him harm...so some scholars interpret this simply as the Pharisees trying to get him out of their town. So, the lesson here is whose voices? You've heard fraudulent, 2nd hand voices before...

Awe – it's not me mate, I love your voice but *some* people have said it's like a dying cat...

Now let's look at place - When Jesus says your House is left to you, desolate. Is he talking about Jerusalem or the Temple? That is a pretty significant distinction. One is the abandonment of a culture or social norm – like the character difference between Sydney and Melbourne and the other, well, that's saying God's not in the Temple anymore. That's a whole switch on perception.

Now the question of ‘whose voice?’ is an important one – as is, ‘where’s God?’ especially on our Lenten journey.

Remember the temptations? Last week we talked about the role of the Devil in testing Jesus and strengthening his understanding of both his calling and his faith. And most importantly, we talked about listening.

Before a person puts up their hand for candidacy for Ministry, they participate in a process called ‘a period of discernment’ -POD. The process takes one through a whole range of exercises examining your doubts, your spiritual development, your beliefs and your view of God.

Towards the end, before you make a decision to go ahead or not, there is one super-challenging exercise. In it, you list the voices and what they are saying or what you *believe* they might say about your ministry. I don’t mean that metaphorically. You actually fill in a form asking yourself: What would mother say? What would friends say? What about siblings? Your partner and children? Your neighbours and workmates? What do your enemies say? What have you been telling yourself? What do you think God is saying? It is an exercise that really makes you confront the voices; both the good and bad.

We are loathe to articulate the critics and yet, we act on them. The act of actually spelling them out on paper (or electronic ink) not only shows up the flaws in their arguments but puts them in perspective. They are usually greatly outnumbered by other voices and yet we give them power.

Once in a counselling session, the counsellor asked me if my mother was hypercritical. ‘Yes’, I said, ‘very’. And she said, ‘is she dead?’ ‘Yes’, I said. Then she asked, ‘who’s doing it now?’. She pointed out that when the critical voices are silenced – we take up their job. So true! How many times have you looked in the mirror and called yourself stupid? Again, the lesson is, who’s voice are we listening to?

Jesus was certain. In his words, and this is apparently an accurate translation, “I *must* press on today, tomorrow and the next day.” The warnings from the Pharisees might have been genuine or deceitful, but it doesn’t matter. He dismisses them. Whatever the pharisees or Herod might have planned - Jesus, has his own plan, God’s plan. Even as this passage makes it clear that his death is part of the plan. Not here, but in Jerusalem where they kill prophets.

The passage ends in a poignant wish. He longs to gather and protect Jerusalem's people like a hen gathers her chicks. We sit, under the wings of a loving God.

Paul's letter in Philippians warns the people of all the other voices. He trying to define what the people of God should be like. He tries to define what the enemies of the cross might be like. Well, there is good news and bad news. He is so ambiguous, it really gives us no guidance *and* because he is so ambiguous, the question and definition are as open and valid today as it was so long ago. What does a good church look like? He talks about opposition – and there is plenty in the Christian church.

There are those who would refuse women leadership roles and those who reject and condemn gay, lesbian and transgender people. I think they try to pretend that God did not make *them* – those other people. There are racist churches and churches whose dogma is so set in stone that anyone asking questions is denounced and excluded. How do they justify that with an inclusive Jesus?

Our Lenten journey is about slowing down and listening. It is about fasting from all the noisy voices and waiting for the still, small voice. In sitting in our silent deserts, we know that we are not alone. The spirit dwells within us and will speak softly if we give it room. Who we are and whose we are – they are the only defining questions for the season.

So instead of singing *Jerusalem* where they stone prophets, the words of Keith Getty's hymn ring in my ears:

In Christ alone my hope is found. He is my light, my strength, my song.
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground...¹

We are not alone. Crowding and crowing voices fill our heads and drown out the One who is always with us.

We are not alone as long as we gather under the wings as a community of faith holding on and caring for one another.

Look around you – we are not alone.

¹... Firm through the fiercest drought and storm. What heights of love, what depths of peace. When fears are stilled, when strivings cease. My Comforter, my All in All. Here in the love of Christ I stand.