

There's a little poem that goes like this:

History always repeats itself

It has to

No-one ever listens!

One of the reasons the commemoration of historical events is important is to help later generations reflect on what has gone before and seek to avoid making the same mistakes, causing the same misery or allowing themselves to be caught in the same circumstances.

While I dislike the triumphalism and civic religion often associated with commemorations of the First and Second World Wars in the UK – it is necessary that stories of conflict and the reality of war are told.

Coming to the Netherlands introduced me to a different kind of commemoration – that of liberation. To experience the silence on the eve of Liberation Day, see flags outside so many houses and the celebrations on Liberation Day was quite something. From what I've seen I suspect there are probably more Second World War American and British army vehicles in the Netherlands than in America or Britain!

This week in the UK there's been the commemoration of the 1819 Peterloo Massacre as it has come to be known. As the Guardian newspaper puts it: '200 years ago sabre-wielding cavalry charged into a crowd of 60,000 protesters in one of the defining moments in British political history.' Some 18 people were killed, many injured. The protesters were people from the working classes marching to demand the right to vote in elections as that was, at that time, a right reserved for those of financial means such as the wealthy land owners.

Back in Northern Ireland where I come from there was this week a parade of veterans who served in Operation Banner – commemorating 50 years since the British Army was sent onto the streets of Londonderry in August 1969. It was an operation that lasted much longer than was anticipated.

But, and it's a big 'but':

Commemorations are never simple, the interpretation of historical events is always compromised and contested in some way or another.

The deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland turned into the longest active deployment of British soldiers in British military history and there are many people in Northern Ireland not at all happy about how that worked out.

Did the events of Peterloo constitute a massacre? Did it change the course of British political history? Not everyone agrees on either of these points.

Is the celebration of liberation in the Netherlands free from the debates over the role of those in the resistance and those who collaborated with the Nazis?

Was the sending of hundreds of thousands of soldiers out of the trenches to certain death not a war crime on the part of the generals? How does that get airbrushed out of the commemorations? Did so many men make the ultimate sacrifice or were they sacrificed?

History is tricky, never straightforward, but it is important to try and learn the lessons of history. Which is what intrigued me about the Old Testament reading in the lectionary for today.

We start with Psalm 80 which references events that took place sometime in the 8th century BC. Between c. 740 – 720 BC the Assyrian empire conquered the northern Israelite kingdom. Under Kings David and Solomon there had been one Israelite kingdom but due to a civil war it later became two – known as Israel in the north and Judah in the south. It was the northern kingdom that was overrun by the Assyrians with many people carried off into captivity and much of the country left desolate. The Assyrians besieged Jerusalem – which was the capital of the southern kingdom Judah, but because of trouble back at home they had to call off their siege – but it was a close thing.

Psalm 80 is an expression of the despair of the people of the northern kingdom. The psalmist calls on God – the Shepherd of Israel, do something – stir up your might and power and come and save us!! It's part prayer, part demand, imploring God but at the same time asking God what's keeping him, why isn't this situation being sorted out?

The psalmist accuses God of reducing them to tears and complains that our enemies scoff at us, they laugh among themselves – which is also code for saying to God – they are laughing at you, God.

Verses 8-11 rehearse before God part of their history, their story of being God's special people. 'You brought a vine out of Egypt – created space for it in Canaan, planted it, clearing away the stones and letting it take root in the soil. It was so successful that its influence reached from the Mediterranean Sea on the west to the deserts on the east, from the borders of Egypt in the south to the borders of Damascus in the north. But God, you've broken down the wall of the vineyard and the wild boars have ploughed it up and whoever wants comes and takes what they want. Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted. Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.'

The second reading from Isaiah 5 belongs to the same period – between 742-687 BC – but Isaiah's message is directed more to the southern kingdom of Judah. Judah had a close shave, when the Assyrians had managed to get to the gates of Jerusalem, and lived under the shadow of Assyrian might. Isaiah called the nation to a radical faithfulness to God and, like many of the prophets, proclaimed an unpopular message warning of likely coming destruction for failure to do so.

Isaiah, too, uses the imagery of vines and vineyards. Chapter 5 is really a prophetic poem echoing the ideas of Psalm 80 and speaks of how God planted a vineyard – the Israelites – in fertile ground. It carefully recounts all the hard work required in planting a vineyard in the stony ground in the hills around Jerusalem and speaks of how God dug the ground; cleared

the stones; planted the very best; built a watchtower; built his wine vats; did everything that was necessary to allow the vine to thrive and produce good fruit and good wine.

But Isaiah cries that it only produced wild, sour grapes! So the prophet speaks on behalf of God, asking

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it. When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

Isaiah prophesies that God will remove the hedges and break down the wall of the vineyard of Judah just as with Israel in the north. The vineyard will be a wasteland filled with briars and thorns, barren, parched and ruined. The prophet looks on his people in Judah and is in despair:

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

By 597 the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem, looted the city and the Temple and deported many of the inhabitants. In 587 they destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and carried many more off into captivity. History was repeating itself, it had to, no one listened despite the warnings of many prophets such as Isaiah.

Three questions that arise from this are worth reflection.

1. How are we to interpret this history?

Were the prophets justified in arguing that God in his anger engineered the downfall of the northern kingdom, then the southern kingdom as well, as it says in 5:25:

... the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them; the mountains quaked, and their corpses were like refuse in the streets.

For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still.

Or were the prophets just looking for ways to explain the misfortune of Israel and Judah and how they came to be on the wrong side of history?

As with many historical events you generally need to go further back than the event itself to get a fuller picture. Israel had enjoyed a special calling and was granted a special covenant by God. Their calling was to be a witness to the world of the justice and righteousness, the mercy and love of God. The covenant God made with their ancestors held both privilege and responsibility.

Under the leadership of Moses and Aaron God had brought the people out of captivity in Egypt. Despite their rebellion, God nurtured them through the wilderness and enabled them to settle and become a major empire – this was all part of the privilege of their calling by God. But the responsibility that came with the privilege was to be a light to the nations, to

practise the mercy and love they experienced from God, to model the justice and righteousness of God.

It clearly didn't work out that way and Isaiah in his poem lists some of the problems that have arisen: greed and selfishness mark the community as they are selfishly building property empires; the people engage in hedonistic lifestyles; they have created what we would call a post-truth society; they are characterised by pride; they even pervert justice accepting bribes.

So, Isaiah says in 5:7:

Israel and Judah were God's pleasant planting and he expected to see justice but sees only bloodshed, he expected to see righteousness and sees only distress.

The terms of the relationship were clear at the outset. There was the promise of blessing, the blessing that the priests were to pronounce on the people (Numbers 6:22-27):

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

And there was the warning of judgement, should Israel follow other gods and compromise the justice and righteousness they were to model.

What the prophets saw in the desolation of both the northern and southern kingdoms, what they anticipated or commented upon, were not simply the accidents of history but the judgement of God on the abandonment, even the perversion of justice, righteousness, mercy and love.

2. Is there a lesson for the church in this?

We're looking at events over 2,500 years ago; can they have any relevance to the church today? I think the answer is a very definite yes.

For years the church in the west in all its various expressions has been struggling to maintain its witness in the face of increasing secularisation. It is possible to find many sociological explanations for that decline: shift from deference to the church to the rise of reason and the growth of individualism paved the way; the more recent post-modern turn took things a step further challenging the legitimacy of authority and reason; the rise of affluence and self-sufficiency in Western societies; the changing nature of life from rural to urban can all be seen as contributors to the decline of Christianity in the West. There are many possible and legitimate explanations for the decline of the church.

But the church is not just another human institution at the mercy of sociological factors – important as they are to understand. The church is the body of Christ, the community called to witness to Jesus, his mercy and love, the justice and righteousness we see in him. We

need to reflect and ask: where was the justice and righteousness, the mercy and love when the church did hold much greater sway in Western society?

Where was its voice in the crusades – other than supporting the violence and destruction? Where was its voice during the inquisitions and the persecution of Catholics by Protestants and Protestants by Catholics in the Reformation era? Where was its voice during the rise of the great European Empires that raped the colonies, enslaved their people, profited off their misfortune?

It is salutary to note that in the letters to the churches in Revelation it is Jesus who warns the churches that he will remove their lampstands, it is Jesus who will spew out the lukewarm Laodiceans.

Precisely because the church is the body of Christ it is not simply at the mercy of evil forces or societal changes. Just as God would not allow Israel to compromise his justice and righteousness, his mercy and love, so too with the church. So, perhaps the answers to the questions about our apparent exile lie in the history of our failures. Perhaps we need to look to ourselves – to learn the lessons of history and in our day work out what it means to pursue justice and righteousness, mercy and love.

While the ERC and the people of this church would never claim to be the best they could be, it is a sign of health here that there is concern and action to ensure that the refugee is cared for, the homeless are fed, the stranger is made welcome, the community cares for its own.

Justice and righteousness, mercy and love must be restored to the heart of the life and witness of the church.

Israel cried to God that the nations were mocking because of their predicament – Israel had to learn that God cared more about justice and righteousness, mercy and love than he did about Israel saving face. God cares more about justice, righteousness, mercy and love than what people think about the church.

3. Where is the good news in this story?

Is there any good news?

Most certainly, and it is simply this: God cares about justice, about righteousness, about mercy, about love. We see that in Jesus, in his calling out hypocrisy, in his dignified righteous life, in his identification with the outcast and his love whether for the lepers or his disciples. We see it in the self-giving love of the cross, we see it in the glory of the resurrection.

We long to see justice, righteousness, mercy and love in the war-torn countries of the world but the good news is that, while we may struggle now, justice, righteousness, mercy and love will triumph for, as it says in Revelation, one day:

... the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

With that hope we persevere.

Some of you here this morning will know the experience of injustice, the betrayal of love, being misunderstood, misrepresented, abused in some way or another. While I cannot promise that tomorrow will be better than today, I can promise you that God cares, for history teaches us that God cares about justice, righteousness, mercy and love.

The good news is that one has gone before us through the darkness of rejection, of suffering, of abandonment and he has triumphed and invites us to abide in him for shelter and strength. This morning I want to give the last word to one of our other readings for today: John 15. Let us listen and reflect:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Amen.