

SERMON FOR TRINITY 12 | 3 September 2017

On Wednesday night, once the rain had finally stopped, we went to see *Jesus Christ Superstar* at the Open Air Theatre in Regents Park. The music and the lyrics of this dramatized version of the Passion of Jesus by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice has held up amazingly well since it was first staged back in 1971.

But despite the title, the opera starts with Judas not Jesus. Judas worries about the ‘other worldiness’ of Jesus, his lack of concern for the way the Jewish authorities and the Romans will respond to his claim to be king, his trust that whatever happens is determined by God.

At the interval, when everyone needed a stretch, I said to Sinead: Judas is really very good but Jesus could do with a bit more punch. I’m afraid he was coming across as a bit of a wimp. Musically and dramatically Judas had all the best lines.

Which of course is exactly what was intended. Jesus was a pale shadow of Judas who is much more charismatic, far more savvy – and in this context, it was he who brought the house down with far more applause at the end of the show. *Poor old Jesus*, goes one of the songs, and rightly so. And the disciples never do ‘get it’.

In particular, Peter does not ‘get it’. There it is in today’s Gospel: Jesus has patiently been trying to talk through why he was going to Jerusalem and what would happen there. And he says quite clearly, how he would suffer and die.

We have heard quite a lot from Peter in the Gospel readings recently – not much of it complimentary. And here he is again, getting it absolutely wrong: *you mean so much to us, Jesus: the last thing we want is for you to suffer in any way. This must never happen to you.*

And Jesus is angrier with Peter his chief apostle than with anyone else in the whole Gospel story.

What is interesting for us, though, is the phrase that Jesus uses: *Get behind me Satan* in the original Greek is exactly the same verb as *Follow me*. In other words, ‘*get behind*’ has that other ring about it, the words you might use when asking people to support a football club that isn’t doing very well; *go on, get behind them. Give them the help and the encouragement they need to get out of this particular losing streak.*

But, we say, how can I do that if I don’t believe in the manager or his tactics?

Exactly, says Jesus, it is your faith in this apparently insane way of going forward that I want you to adopt. My ways are not the ways of the world – or the ways of Satan with his quick fix ‘giving in’ to what seems best or easiest.

One of the interesting debates of the last ten years or so has hinged on the political term, austerity. In the face of the financial crash (Britain’s deficit in 2009-10 peaked at an eye watering £153 billion) George Osborne told us that unless there were huge cuts to public spending, the finances of the UK Ltd. would be unsustainable.

Seven years on, the political map has changed out of all recognition. Philip Hammond has now vowed to postpone the target surplus to 2025. Why: because the public is fed up with austerity. It looks at the cuts to schools, hospitals, potholed roads and the public sector pay cap on the lowest earners in our community and it seems to be saying: this isn’t working. And as a result the new thinking seems to be a move from austerity to economic stimulus. Strangely, not all financiers are convinced that deficits are the end of the world.

But, given the words, *Take up your cross*, would Jesus be more in favour of austerity rather than stimulus? Is that what ‘taking up our cross’ is all about?

I don’t think so. Jesus’ care for the poor and his criticism of the complacent rich is all too familiar. So what is his solution?

You won’t be surprised that his approach is rarely structural and almost always change at the personal, micro level.

On the front of the today’s *Weekly News* is a small graphic: and the question superimposed on top of lots of spanners and wrenches is:

‘Are you being used by God?’ (We have to take the word ‘used’ in a positive sense: of course it doesn’t mean *are you being abused by God* as modern parlance might suggest.)

It is this question which lies at the heart of all that Jesus is about: *given all the freedom given to you, what are you doing to build the best kind of caring and loving society - where you are?*

For me, listening to the superb and hugely persuasive voice of Judas on Wednesday night, it was about challenging that niggling feeling that what “I” am about here at St James’ is keeping the Church institution running ‘at all costs’. Somehow, we must keep the show on the road; we don’t want things to fail on our watch!

I can’t find the reference right now but I was usefully brought up short by someone, writing this week, who reminded me that our priority – indeed our only job in life - is to reveal the love of Jesus for everyone. Everything else needs to be left to God.

Now for someone like me who likes to organise and plan, down to the nth degree, that was pretty salutary. It was the ‘now’ version of Jesus’ words: *whoever want to be a follower of mine must take up their cross and follow me.*

Because being used by God is not necessarily to follow my own instincts but to simply go on giving, caring, loving – using time, minute by minute, for the benefit of all who need Christ’s healing.

I know Judas’ calling will seem more powerful and persuasive for much of the time. Public affirmation and my own mental ‘self-justification’ will always be there, niggling away. But the softer, less forceful voice of Jesus on that stage on Wednesday is the one we need to hear: *let go and let God.* He knows what he is doing.

And unless we are willing to do it his way, no amount of austerity and self-improvement will make God’s Kingdom come. We really do have to allow him to ‘use us’ if we are going to turn our society around from the selfishness of death to the hope of life eternal.

Use us, Lord, but let it be your way - even if it is the way of the Cross.