

Restoring the Kingdom
Iona Abbey
Sunday, May 28, 2017
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Acts 1:6-14

It's a joy to be in your midst and I want to thank the Iona community for the honor of preaching from this pulpit.

I have learned to clarify the question of my religious identity at the outset when preaching from the pulpit. After returning home to the U.S. from a pilgrimage to Palestine with the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 2006, I began to speak in churches, full of passion about what I had seen and felt. There were no invitations from synagogues – more on that. I found myself being asked, particularly after preaching from the lectionary at a Sunday morning worship, and talking a lot about Jesus, when had I converted? I struggled to answer that question – what did that really mean, I wondered, to “convert?” After a time, I found myself answering in this way: I wish that things had gone differently in the first century so I would not have to be answering that question! I have come more and more to challenge these categories, these divisions between “faith communities.” I feel that it is more and more important to reflect on what unites us rather than divides us. I find myself identifying with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sitting in a Nazi prison contemplating what had become of his German church, and how betrayed he had felt by the ecumenical movement of his time for failing to confront the heresy into which the German church had fallen. In his very last communications he was questioning how far religion had strayed from spirituality and commitment to the divine. He asked, in a letter to a friend, whether the category of religion had to give way to something deeper, something that transcended the divisions between people and groups that religion had produced. And this was a man whose profound and fierce love of Jesus was at the center of his spiritual being. He was questioning Christianity – not Jesus!

Having said that, and you'll see where I'm going with this -- I confess that over the years I have had some difficulty with the Easter lectionary texts, with their focus on belief in the reality of the resurrection and the concept of personal salvation that comes from that. And this is not because of my being Jewish, but -- and I share this with many Christian friends and colleagues -- because of questions theologically about how the whole notion of personal religious and spiritual experience has been transmitted and sold by the church over the centuries -- how that has contributed to the creation of divisions between groups and the granting of exceptional status and privilege to some and the exclusion of others. But beyond that, it's about the way that the focus on the personal relationship with the divine can track people into a way of seeing Jesus that leaves out the sociological and political context in which his life and ministry were

grounded. In fact, it's a false distinction – the individual connection to the divine has everything to do with our work here on earth.

Today is the “Seventh Sunday of Easter,” in other words, we are still in Easter, still doing Easter – working on understanding what Easter means. The period following Easter as described in the Gospel narrative is not a time of clarity, but of questioning, even confusion for those who had been closest to Jesus: What did all this mean? What do we do now? Jesus’ followers manifest an alarming difficulty in even recognizing him when he appears to them, much less understanding the meaning of what had happened that week in Jerusalem. As I read the texts I began to realize that this confusion is an important, even essential part of the Easter experience. There is much talk about the time between Friday and Sunday –it is all darkness, uncertainty and fear, and then on Easter it’s all light and everything clears up. But that’s not the story that is told in the Gospels. Nothing clears up. In fact, the real confusion begins on Easter. And the period between Easter and Pentecost is about the journey from confusion to understanding, from uncertainty to mission.

One of my favorite texts on this is found in the last chapter of Luke. In the days following Easter, Jesus makes one of his appearances to his disciples, who are, frankly, in a state of confusion, even paralysis.

Jesus himself appeared and stood among the eleven and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

Let’s go back to the very beginning of the chapter. It’s dawn on Sunday. The women had returned to the tomb, rolled away the stone -- no body. “Perplexed,” is the word used – the Greek can be better rendered “bewildered.” And they are chastised for their utter failure to understand what had happened. “*Why are you looking for the living among the dead?*” It’s perhaps the same question, isn’t it, asked today on Ascension – why are looking up to heaven? The answer is right here, on earth, if you want to know me, if you want to find me.

Later, Jesus, patiently follows on this theme with his loving but clueless followers.

“Look at my hands and my feet;” he instructs them. “See that it is I myself. Touch me and see.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Here Jesus was trying to clear up the confusion. Look at my body, look at my wounds, consider my physical pain. Hear that I need to eat, I am hungry. Don’t you understand that this whole ministry has been about my humanness, that I

suffer as our people suffer, from being beaten, persecuted, starved? Are you looking for God? Do you want to know the Father? This whole story you have been part of is about that suffering and about the mind and the heart of God who feels that pain and experiences that hunger. Look at my wounds, know my pain, feed my hunger! And then go and do this for the least of these, meaning those suffering under the boot of oppression, that is what God wants, this is Torah.

I was born in 1948 – a month before the establishment of the State of Israel. As a Jew, I was taught that a miracle had blessed my generation. The State of Israel was redemption from millennia of persecution, marginalization, and slaughter. This theme of danger, of threat to our very survival, is deeply embedded in our sensibility as Jews, even for me, growing up free of anti-Semitism in mid-century America. I remember so well the catalog of enemies -- from Pharaoh to Hitler, and now the “Arabs” as we called them. I was taught that among all the nations of the earth of whom I had to beware, two stood out: the Germans, because of what they had done to us, and the “Arabs,” because of what they would do to us if we didn’t have Israel. This explains a lot about the State of Israel today, this sense of isolation, threat, and fear. It’s not hard to understand how this has been reinforced over the years – but, especially now, as we witness what Israel is doing, this identity, this group psychology, if you will, is showing itself to be very problematic, indeed it has led us deeply into sin. And it is something I have had to overcome personally.

I first visited Israel as a boy of 17, and I fell in love with the young state. I was proud of what my people had done, creating this vibrant country out of the ashes of Auschwitz. My Israeli family – religious Jews – embraced me. But even as I embraced them in return, I realized that they talked about “the Arabs” in the same way that whites talked about black people in the pre-Civil Rights Philadelphia where I had grown up. I knew then, at some level, that something was wrong. I still didn’t know the facts, but a seed had been planted.

After the 1967 war, as Israel’s colonization of the West Bank and Gaza continued, and with it the continuing theft of Palestinian land and taking of Palestinian rights, I began to see that there was another story to be told. It was a story of suffering and of grave injustice at our hands. Still, I held to the Jewish narrative: the Occupation, although lamentably abusive of human rights, was the price of security, the cost for our Jewish State, what we needed for our survival, for our very identity.

It had taken 40 years for the seed to sprout, but traveling in Israel and the Occupied Territories in 2006, my defenses against seeing the reality of Israel as an occupying, colonizing power crumbled. I stood before the 25-foot high concrete wall cutting through Jerusalem and I realized that it was a physical manifestation of, and the inevitable consequence of, the wall of mistrust, fear and separation inside me. I learned the other narrative– the story of the Palestinians, and I realized that *this* is the Jewish story of today -- not our past suffering, but

the suffering we were causing today, the crimes we were committing against another people. Frankly, I didn't know how to square that with my Jewish identity.

And then, one morning my delegation visited the offices of Sabeel, the Palestinian Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, in East Jerusalem. We sat with Nora Carmi, hearing her story of dispossession and oppression. I asked her how she deals with being dispossessed and occupied. I will never forget her answer: We follow Jesus. Who was Jesus? He was a Palestinian Jew living under Roman occupation. Faced with this situation, Jesus did not turn to hatred of his oppressors, in contrast, he taught love of humankind, commitment to God's requirement to pursue social justice, and persistent, stubborn, nonviolent resistance to tyranny. We follow Jesus, she said. Empires come and empires go. We are here.

It was as if I had been knocked over by a strong wind.

Leaving Sabeel that day, I took with me a copy of Father Naim Ateek's book, *Justice Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*. In the book he draws a direct line from the Old Testament prophets to Jesus of Nazareth. This spoke to me powerfully. Jesus was raised, as I was, in Jewish tradition. Torah, prophets, psalms. Did I believe in the Deuteronomic call for justice? In the prophets speaking of truth to power? Had I not been taught that the core of my identity as a Jew was a commitment to compassion for all people, and the prophetic charge for social justice above all as our duty to God?

I realized that my outrage toward the actions of my own people was the most Jewish thing I had ever felt, and that working for justice in Palestine was the most Jewish thing I could do. I realized that my own people had to transcend our sense of specialness and victim-tinged entitlement, a sense incubated for 2000 years that had now taken the form of political Zionism -- the claim to the land as our particular inheritance and birthright. There was no justification -- biblical, theological, or historical -- for what we were doing to the Palestinians. With the support and blessing, by the way, of the world powers *and the church itself!*

And so now to our text:

It is 40 days past Easter. Jesus, having appeared on a number of occasions to the disciples, has told them not to leave Jerusalem, that they must wait just a few days to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. The disciples, as usual, are clueless. More than that -- they get it completely wrong! As they have many times before, they proceed to ask a question that reveals that they still do not understand what Jesus has been talking about for three and a half years, even now, even after Easter. "Is this the time," they ask him, "is it now Lord, that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Even now, they do not comprehend what is meant by the Kingdom of God. They think it is about an earthly kingdom. King. Temple. Army.

And so, at the close of this first chapter of Acts, we, like the disciples, are waiting to understand what power is. Jesus gives them a hint, and it is the very last thing he tells them before he ascends to heaven: you will, for sure, receive power, and it will not be in Jerusalem, or even in Judea and Samaria, but to the ends of the earth.

Jesus had been dropping hints all along the way. On the Sunday he entered Jerusalem he heads straight for the Temple, the heart of the beast, as it were – notice, not the King’s palace, not the seat of Empire, but the Temple – and standing before it, as recorded in the gospel of John, declares, “destroy this Temple and in 3 days I will build it up again.” Again, the disciples don’t get it. But the narrator of the gospel, so we will be sure to get the theology, interjects: “But he was speaking of the Temple of his body.” Body of Christ – one humanity, united in equality, compassion and love. The Kingdom of God.

Jesus was making a political statement. If we are to survive this tyranny, Jesus was saying, if we are to be true to God, something new has to happen, some fundamentals have to change: Building a house to God on a particular mountain, over! (Remember the Samaritan woman at the well?) No more God living in a house at all, no more one family or tribe or nation building that house! No more divine real estate deals! Because it brings this – kings, tyranny, the 1% enslaving the 99%, Yes – it was to be a new covenant – not a new religion, not a new chosen people displacing the former one, this was not replacement theology, we are blessed and you are damned, but a new covenant for the people of God, meaning *everyone, everywhere*. Jesus was a radical Jewish reformer, calling on *his people to reclaim their true calling to social justice and to take it beyond their narrow tribal boundaries*.

I can’t help comparing this scenario to the one the Jews are facing today. It’s the wrong kingdom we are pursuing. It won’t bring us the deliverance we are looking for.

And I find myself asking: Can Christians today be courageously, faithfully, and *unapologetically* Christian in taking up the cause of Palestine? Can they pick up the cross of being accused of betraying their hard-won friendship with the Jewish people, can they understand that sometimes confronting your friend in his or her sin is what true friendship requires? And can Christians, who in their penitential zeal over the sins of the church toward the Jewish people became afraid of saying yes, we, the church, did bring something new to the world, can Christians proclaim anew this new thing, bring this message afresh to the world? No more land deals! No more one people being chosen! All are chosen! Anything else is a betrayal before God! The Jewish community may or may not someday walk alongside you in this, but you must not wait for us. We have our own serious family business to attend to. You, the church, must look to your own house.

The church must ask, as did Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *who is Jesus for us today?* The question has been asked and answered by the church in the memories and even the lifetimes of many of us sitting here. The proud record begins with the 1934 Barmen Declaration by German church leaders speaking out against a church in collusion with the racism and hyper-nationalism of the Nazi regime. In midcentury, African American pastors and laypersons changed the political and social landscape of America in the struggle to end legalized racism. The ecumenical church found its prophetic voice in 1968 when the World Council of Churches established the Programme to Combat Racism, affirming in word and deed that combatting institutionalized racism was the primary mission of the world body. In 1977 the Lutheran World Federation declared a *status confessionis* – I don't need to translate - in regard to apartheid in South Africa. This was followed by the World Alliance of Reformed churches in 1982, which suspended the member churches of South Africa over their support of Apartheid! In 1985, an ecumenical group of South African pastors and theologians declared that the Apartheid regime was illegitimate and that it was a *Christian duty* to call for its end. Arising from and speaking with increasing insistence through these actions is the idea of one *true* church, acting, - in South African theologian John de Gruchy's words, as "the community within which God manifests in history."

Is the church not now in a *status confessionis*? Is not Palestine today, and all that it represents about the global domination system, a human rights issue that demands the church's attention? Look at the wounds, look at the hunger, feel God's pain, hear the cry of the oppressed! The church has done it before. The church can do it again. And it has begun.

This the clear and simple message of Pentecost. It is a story of resistance, of faith, before, in the words of today's Epistle reading, "the roaring lion of your adversary." "Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering! The everlasting and unfailing power of the Spirit will restore, support, strengthen and establish you." This is the story we have come to tell again this week on this island. This is the story and the Spirit to which this community has been devoted since its founding in the 1930s and indeed since its original founding over 1400 hundred years ago, as the tradition has it, on Pentecost.

In closing, I would like to bring to mind again the events that led to that Easter of long ago, the day Jesus entered Jerusalem. He was accompanied by his followers, who were joyfully (and noisily) celebrating the message and ministry of a leader who offered them dignity and hope in the darkest times.

The Gospel of Luke records:

"As Jesus was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the

deeds of power that they had seen, saying ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’”

The local authorities were displeased. Your singing and praising and proclaiming, they told Jesus, threatened to disrupt the establish order, to spoil the accommodation they had made with the Empire. “‘Teacher,’ they said to him, ‘order your disciples to stop!’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, *the very stones would shout out!*’”

Whether praise or protest, you cannot silence the cry of the oppressed nor deny the hunger for justice. And what was all the noise about? It was the spontaneous response of an oppressed, occupied people—a cry of love, adoration and sheer joy for the miracle of Jesus’ ministry—his power to heal, to inspire, to lead. *You can’t stop this!* Jesus was saying. Nature itself, even these seeming inert stones, resonates with the joy and life force emanating from the people.

My sisters and brothers, the time has come for us to do some shouting.

Let us pray.

Compassionate, loving, challenging and fierce Lord of Creation, grant that we remember those brave, desperate singers and praisers of long ago, and grant that we join with those who struggle for justice today – those who are wounded, hungry, perplexed. Grant us the clarity to shout for justice.

The times challenge us to remain true to the principles that lie at the heart of our faith traditions. In these urgent, prophetic times, let us remember the shouting. God loves that shouting.

And let the people of God say, no, let the people of God SHOUT –

AMEN!