

## **LENT COURSE 2013**

### Week Five: In the City.

As preparation for next Tuesday, read one or more of the following meditations which introduce the themes of the session.

Please bring with you a picture of the city. It could show buildings or people, scenes of everyday city life, metropolitan wealth or urban deprivation, people in power or victims of crime. It could be a photograph, a newspaper clipping or a painting, such as the northern industrial streets painted by L.S. Lowry. Whatever your picture is, take it to the session as a focus for discussion.

#### 1. Modern City.

A city priest describes the way in which awareness is encouraged by urban retreats called 'Retreats on the Streets':

"The idea is that people spend a day in the city with nothing to do, other than be aware of what is happening around them and to reflect on the fact that the people in the city, rich and poor, are all God's children. During the day, which they spend alone, they become aware of the vast differences in power and wealth which exist side by side in the city."

(David Rhodes, Lenten Adventure, SPCK 2000, p.78)

If we are to meet God in the city, then surely we must engage with the life of the city in the way that Jesus did – by encountering the people. In a time of quiet today, reflect on your own experience of the city, wherever you live. Consider making your own Retreat on the Street: who might you encounter if you stopped and chatted, rather than passing busily on your way? How might this deepen your awareness of life in the city?

"In the streets of every city

Where the bruised and lonely dwell,

Let us show the Saviour's pity,

Let us of his mercy tell..."

(Hugh Sherlock 1905 – 1998 )

## 2 Jerusalem.

Imagine: the main roads to the coast on a Bank Holiday

Oxford Street before Christmas

Edinburgh during the Festival

There are long queues and short tempers wherever people stop for refreshments; the cashpoints are running out; accommodation is at a premium and those whose trade booms during these peak periods – the souvenir-sellers and the stallholders – have inflated their prices and are doing well. There are familiar landmarks and extraordinary sights; groups of people in peculiar clothes; strange faces from foreign countries. You can't simply walk from A to B: you end up shuffling through the crowds, the heat and a cacophony of different languages rising around you.

This gives us a taste of what Jerusalem might have been like during one of the three annual Jewish pilgrimage festivals of Jesus' time. Jews from all around the Mediterranean travelled there, hugely increasing the city's population for the duration of the festival. Pilgrims then needed what travellers always need: accommodation, food, local currency. They also needed to buy an animal to offer for sacrifice at the temple, and local entrepreneurs surely capitalised on these requirements.

Jerusalem in Jesus' time was a thriving place. Part of the Roman Empire, it had been ruled in the previous century by Herod the Great, who had initiated a series of major building works in the city. He is most famous for his construction of a new, much bigger Jewish temple; the focus of the pilgrimage festivals. Founded on a greatly-enlarged Temple Mount, built of enormous blocks of shining white stone, Herod's new temple included many large, outer courtyards to cater for pilgrims and to serve the secular needs of the traveller as well as the sacred purpose of the temple itself. It was a work-in-progress, already 46 years under construction by the time Jesus visited it shortly before his death. Pilgrims came and gazed in awe: 'Some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God.' (Luke 21: 5) One of the disciples sounds like an impressed tourist: 'As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!"' (Mark 13: 1).

People would travel to Jerusalem and the Temple was central to the purpose of their pilgrimage and their devotions. Imagine arriving as a

pilgrim in such a bustling, busy place, buying your dove, noticing the other pilgrims and the priests...

In a time of quiet today, having found a comfortable place, concentrate on your breathing... After a few moment of silence, begin reading fist Matthew 21: 12 - 16, then John 2: 13 - 21 slowly; listening for God's voice or noting a word or phrase that seems to stand out. Memorise and repeat it to yourself. Allow it to speak into the concerns of your heart that come to mind. Bring these words or images to God and speak to God about them, holding nothing back. Now rest here in God's embrace. Return to the scripture or to silent reflection and listening as you feel led.

### 3 Power

The capital city has always been the place where ordinary people have gathered to challenge authority and the status quo.

When Jesus went to Jerusalem for the last time, he was consciously going from the provinces to the centre of religious and secular power. He made a public but deliberately peaceful entrance, riding on a humble donkey rather than a warrior-king's charger. Yet he confronted authority at every turn: in the temple, in the street, even in the Sanhedrin (the Jewish supreme - court) and the Roman governor's headquarters. This was not 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'; to the authorities, he was a stirrer, an inciter of civil unrest and religious disobedience, a thorn in the side of the powers that be. No wonder so many of his followers believed he would be a revolutionary leader who would overthrow Roman rule and liberate Jerusalem for the Jews.

In India in the twentieth century, a Hindu temple was being built next to the local mosque. Religious leaders called it blasphemy; there were scuffles in the streets and the mood in the town was tense and volatile:

"No one knew how the men who were gathering in the narrow alleys. . . became a mob. One moment they were walking individually or in small groups through the alleys towards the mosque for evening prayer, then they had coalesced into larger clusters, excitedly discussing the ominous signals they had heard. . . A couple of the more eager members of the Committee made a few crowd-rousing remarks, a few local hotheads and toughs stirred themselves and those around them into a state of rage, the crowd increased in size as the alleys joined into larger alleys, its density and speed and sense of indistinct

determination increased, and it was no longer a collection but a thing – wounded and enraged, and wanting nothing less than to wound and enrage.”

(Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, Phoenix House 1993, p.251)

Here, ordinary people of faith become a rioting mob with a will of its own. Whether in post-Independence India or first-century Jerusalem, the dynamics of a crowd which becomes a mob are the same.

Read again the Palm Sunday story in Matthew’s Gospel (Matthew 21:1–11) and picture the huge crowds. Notice the way that word about Jesus is spreading, making the whole city a more excited and volatile place. We know the end of the story so well that it is sometimes easy to forget how heavily these expectations may have weighed on Jesus. He knew that he was the Saviour, but only he knew how that salvation was to come about, and how closely his victory would resemble utter defeat for those who believed in him.

Today, consider this crowded, tense city as the context for Jesus’ arrest and execution.

*Based on material from ‘Encountered: meeting God in everyday places’ by Claire Benton Evans and published by Kevin Mayhew in 2009.*