

Jerusalem and Jesus: Déjà Vu Forever?

From the series: God In the Mirror of a Human Face

Text: Luke 19:42

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Luke's portrait of Jesus was written over a half century after the events. By the time he wrote, the Temple at Jerusalem was an ash heap and the city no longer the center of Jewish faith nor of the Jewish Jesus movement.

Thus, the words he puts in Jesus' mouth as he overlooks the city from the Mount of Olives are not prediction but description of the actual situation when Luke wrote. But the core of Luke's story, as well as that of the other Gospels, is most certainly true; Jesus came to Jerusalem. In the Synoptics he came only once; in John, three times. In any case, Luke, after the birth narratives, the Galilean ministry, puts Jesus on the way to Jerusalem (9:51.) The crisis will build until it spills over in his tears; he weeps for the City. He needed not to be a predictor of future events; any sensitive, insightful person might have known catastrophe was around the corner. In spite of his sense of the inevitable disaster, he entered the City and went to the heart of the religious, spiritual life of his people - the Temple.

His coming was peaceful. Mark, followed by Matthew, has overtones of the Messiah King coming to claim his place. Neither Luke nor John present it as such, using instead the images found in Zechariah 9:9-10 of humility, peacefulness, non-apocalyptic, non-political. Jesus acted out symbolically his non-violent protest - he negated the Temple and all it stood for. It had become a den of thieves. The politics of domination and the economics of injustice were all tied up with the Temple as symbolic center, and Jesus' symbolic action was the climax of his non-violent protest in the name of the God of justice.

It was a dangerous, subversive action, for it called in question the legitimacy of the whole structural, religious, political, economic life of the Jewish nation under Roman imperial domination. For this action he was executed as a threat to the safety of the State.

So, there Jesus is on the crest of Olivet overlooking the city - weeping, "O Jerusalem, if only you were able to recognize the things that make for peace. ...

but they are hid from your eyes. Devastation approaches, for your violence in response to Roman violence will bring on greater violence and you will finally be destroyed, the Temple a charred ruin."

Yogi Berra said, "Déjà vu all over again." Seeing Jesus and Jerusalem, one wonders will it ever be so? Will humankind forever experience déjà vu, injustice creating violent reaction leading to violent response, a cycle unending? Is there no hope for the human endeavor, indeed, for the cosmic drama that has incubated the human for 15 billion years and seen its emergence over the last 10,000 years?

Philip Hallie, the Jewish philosopher at Ephesus was immersed in Holocaust documents in the 70s. He had grown up in New Lenox, Illinois and, as a young child, had his face smashed in simply because he was Jewish. He had gone to World War II as an American soldier; he had fired 155 mm shells at German troops and had seen the butchered bodies of those along the road that had been slain by the artillery assault, and in the midst of the immersion in the darkness and the evil of Holocaust, he became totally overcome with despair at the evil and darkness and the seeming hopelessness of the human situation, and he said to himself, "If this is the way it is, life is too heavy a burden to bear. What lies will I have to tell to my children to give them any hope which they need like plants need sunshine?" And he went on to write, "I needed to find passionately some ground for hope, lest I succumb to the coercion of despair."

In the midst of his studying of the documents of the Holocaust, he came across the story of a French village, Le Chambon, the story of the village that was led by a French Huguenot, French Reformed pastor, André Trocmé. André Trocmé grew up in northern France near the Belgian border, the child of wealth and privilege. He, however, had some early experiences. During the First World War, he hated the Germans, although his mother was German. But, he hated them because he saw the way they were treating Russian prisoners who were slave laborers. Then one day as a seventeen-year-old he saw the German wounded coming down the road in retreat. He saw a man stumbling, led by two others, his head all bandaged, his jaw blown off, and in that moment he knew that this also was a human being whom he could not hate.

And then he had an encounter with another German soldier, a man named Kendler who offered him bread, and he said, "I wouldn't take bread from you if I were hungry because you're the enemy," and the soldier said, "I'm not the enemy. I'm a Christian. I belong to Jesus. I carry no weapon. I would shoot no one." Kendler eventually came to a religious union meeting with Trocmé, and Trocmé came to a profound experience of Jesus Christ and of Jesus' non-violent way. Led by this German soldier into an understanding of non-violence, Trocmé wrote, "If Jesus really walked upon this earth, why do we keep treating him as if he were a disembodied, impossibly idealistic, ethical theory? If he was a real man, then the

Sermon on the Mount was made for people on this earth, and if he existed, God has shown us in flesh and blood what goodness is for flesh and blood people."

Trocme became a pastor, eventually in Le Chambon in the late 30s, and through the four years of occupation, 1940-1944, when the Germans had occupied France and a provisional French government Nazified France, the Vichy government. Le Chambon became, through Trocme's leadership, a city of refuge. The network spread and many Jewish people came to find refuge there, to be hidden there or to be brought over the border to Switzerland. There was a deliberate and conscious resistance on the part of the people of Le Chambon under Trocme's leadership. It was not just a willy-nilly kind of thing; it was a deliberate intention to do no harm. He was informed by his own Vichy French government that he must deliver up the refugees, the Jews, and he said, "I don't know any Jews. I only know human beings." He refused.

It is a fascinating story, full of peril and risk, of heroism and dedication and commitment. He, himself, served some time in an internment camp, which was filled with all sorts and conditions of humankind, including some Communist rebels against the French national government and against the Nazis, of course, and he turned the camp almost into a revival meeting. First of all, derided because of his principles of non-violence, but finally through the integrity of his person and the consistency of his witness, breaking through even to some of the officials.

The story of Trocme, a village pastor and the village people is an amazing tale which Philip Hallie researched and finally wrote about in a book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. That was in the mid-70s, about thirty years after the events themselves. He was able to meet many of the people and find out exactly what had gone on there in those years of occupation in the early 40s, when this became an oasis of grace through an insistent non-resistance and the determination to do no harm, no matter what the cost. Trocme was a violent man himself, full of energy, dynamic, ready to burst like a volcano, but Jesus conquered him and kept him in tow, and he was able, through that commitment to the way of Jesus, to contain himself and his own emotions and the power of his person, and was able to lead that village into that kind of consistent witness. He would be called a pacifist and yet he never liked the word because of the nuance of passivity. His mother was German; he spoke German fluently. In 1939 he even writes about debating whether he should infiltrate the entourage of Hitler in order to assassinate him, in order to stave off the catastrophe that obviously lie ahead. But he decided No, because he said, "I must not be separated from Jesus."

I said last week that these are very complex matters. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1944, likewise a brilliant and strong person who was also a pacifist in his conviction as to the way of Jesus, determined he must become one of the conspirators in the attempt on Hitler's life. Two Christians, two followers of Jesus, two followers of Jesus convinced of the way of non-violence as being the way of Jesus, the one

through active resistance but without moving to violence. The other fighting it all the way but finally believing he must take that violent step to end the horror of a Hitler.

You see, these things are not easy; they are very complex and different people will finally have to wrestle out in the concrete situation what their response will be. But, certainly if we're serious about Jesus and we must know that there is a calling to follow in his steps which is not passivity and standing on the sidelines. Trocmé was convinced that the most dangerous people in the world were the people who simply stood apart, unengaged, allowing evil to happen. He was active; he did not simply allow evil to happen, but in his standing the way of evil happening, he was non-violent because, as he writes, he was convinced that Jesus was non-violent and refused to defend himself in the face of the crime that was about to be perpetrated against him.

And here we are in 1999 and we are at war as a nation, and one wonders, if there any hope? Will it be déjà vu forever? I asked you last week what you would do if you were meeting with the President on Sunday morning. Well, the decision was made, the rockets are flying and the bombs are falling. We have ostensibly for humanitarian reasons moved to violence, and we already have the violent backlash, and whatever devastation we have inflicted has stiffened the resistance. Our violence has not caused the violence to cease, but at least at this point, exacerbated it.

What is one to do in such a world? When Trocmé was in the internment camp, the Germans were defeated at Stalingrad and the Communist internees rejoiced, but Trocmé couldn't enter into their celebration and years later he was asked, "Should the Russians simply have given up Stalingrad?" And he said, "No, it was too late. For them at Stalingrad, to have given up would have been suicide. It was too late."

The way of non-violence has to be carefully laid and preparations have to be made and the groundwork has to be laid for it. The Berlin Wall fell in the late 80s after the Cold War that had ensued upon the euphoria of the victory of World War II, and we thought perhaps the decade of the 90s would usher in a whole new world order, and it has continued to be a decade of war and violence, and one wonders, will it be déjà vu forever? Is there no hope? I find at least a ray of hope in that I believe that we, as an American people, are becoming more critical of the spin doctors that would shape our mind. I'm not at all confident about the veracity of the reports that come out of the Pentagon or the State Department or the Administration. I try very hard not to become cynical. I want to believe, but I think a certain self-doubt and a critical mind in receiving such reports is important for us and I think it's happening across the body politic. And then I see an interview or two of an American pilot or a young man or a young woman on a ship from which are being launched the missiles, and I see in them not a rage, but a question - "Are we doing right? Are we doing right?" I would hope no trigger

could ever be pulled or any rocket ever launched without that serious question, Are we doing right?

And maybe, maybe the way of Jesus will be picked up here and there by a growing number of people who will commit themselves like an André Trocmé to do no harm. We cannot take on the whole world, but we live in a network of relationships in families and in communities, and if before the face of Jesus there was that inward commitment on our part to do no harm, just maybe, just maybe sometime the critical mass of humankind will come to realize that the way of Jesus was not the embodiment of an impossibly idealistic ethic, but the only viable solution to the human dilemma. Jesus may be our only hope.

References:

Philip Hallie. *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There*. Harper Perennial, 1997.