

Luke 13:31-35 – “Unholy City” – Lent 2 – Mar 4/07

“Unholy City.” Hardly the image that usually comes to mind when someone mentions Jerusalem, is it? Normally we think of Jerusalem as the very definition of the Holy City, notwithstanding the efforts of the travel bureaus of both the Vatican and Rome. Poems have been written about this city of God; psalms reflect upon and praise the glory of the city; even hymns in our hymn book laud the holiness of the city.

But Jesus’ comments about Jerusalem in our reading from Luke’s gospel, while not using the term “unholy city” are still very condemning. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” Whew! Not the kind of reputation the Chamber of Commerce would like to have bandied about! “How often would I have protected you ... and you were not willing.”

I admit that I have had trouble with this text in the many times I’ve preached on it. How could Jesus have had such a harsh view of the city that represented the very heart of Judaism? The city that housed the temple, the house of God – but even regarding that, Jesus seemed to be distant, remote, uncaring even: “See, your house is left to you.” This text didn’t seem to make much sense apart from being a nasty shot at Jerusalem by Jesus. I could understand it a bit by recognizing that Jesus had already encountered Moses and Elijah on the mountain top and not only knew what lay in store for him in Jerusalem but had already twice told his disciples what was coming. Just the same, his lament over Jerusalem still seemed a bit harsh, a bit condemning.

However, last week while I was working on my thesis I discovered a wonderful new perspective on Jesus that helps this passage make sense. I came across a book titled “Multicultural Christology” by Chun Hoi Heo who teaches Asian Theology at Knox College – our seminary in Toronto – and is (or was) a senior pastor at Korean Bethel Evangelical Church. Chun makes a compelling argument that Jesus lived and carried out his ministry in a multicultural environment, and even that Jesus was most likely multilingual, and probably very fluent in Greek. Wow! Can you grasp how that understanding puts a totally different spin on Jesus’ comments here? Let me work through Chun’s argument here, and see if you agree with me that not only does Jesus being multicultural introduce a whole new understanding of his comments, but also reveals a whole new dimension of grace in this text.

Chun begins with an endorsement of the search for the historical Jesus – actually, the “third wave” of that particular movement – and that does NOT count the latest foeraw hyping the book and movie about finding the tomb of Jesus, and Mary, and Mary Magdalene, and the whole crowd. Just as an aside, I do wish the announcers on CNN and elsewhere would get their speculations right ... if these are indeed the bones of Jesus, the discovery would not discredit the Resurrection, but the Ascension! For what it’s worth, my opinion is that the foeraw is more about selling books and movies than about discovering the truth. In any event, Chun endorses the search for information and truth about the life and times of Jesus. He points out that Jesus was not a Judean, but a Galilean. I’ll let that sink in for a moment, because although we’ve heard it a zillion times, we need to hear it clearly. Jesus was not a Judean, but a Galilean. Even his disciples were from Galilee – recall that Peter the night before the crucifixion is identified as a foreigner by his accent! Galilee was referred to as “the land of the gentiles” by the Judeans, the “official” Jews.

Chun points out that Galilee was split into two regions, lower and upper Galilee. Lower Galilee was adjacent to the coast, was highly urbanized, and the most common language was Greek – had been for almost four hundred years! Upper Galilee on the other hand was rural, agricultural, and spoke Aramaic and/or their own dialect of Hebrew. While we like to think of Jesus in our old Sunday School images as a simple, rural, unsophisticated man trodding the dusty byways of rural Galilee, but

if we listen to the bible texts we are introduced to a somewhat different Jesus. For example, according to Luke 4:31ff he was also a religious teacher in Capernaum, a city in Galilee, where he “spoke with authority.” He was no rube from the back country – Jesus was an articulate, learned teacher. And particularly in Capernaum he would have had to be fluent in Greek – it was the language of commerce and life!

Now just pause for a moment, and reflect upon Jesus as a Galilean – Jewish by heritage, even by temple ritual, but considered a foreigner, an immigrant if you will, in Jerusalem. Doesn’t that put a new flavour on him as a prophet to the Jews? Doesn’t it add a new dimension to the mockery in the sarcastic title given him at the Crucifixion, “King of the Jews?” Doesn’t the image of Jesus as a foreigner, an immigrant in Jerusalem, give a whole new flavour to his comments here? It certainly does for me!

Why is this important? Why should we even care whether or not Jesus was from Galilee, or Judea, or spoke one language or many? I think there are a couple of answers to those questions. To begin, it helps us look at Jerusalem through different eyes. Foreigners, outsiders, strangers tend to see a city in very different ways than do the occupants. Those who live, work, play and go to school in the city, especially those who have done so all their lives see the city through filters of familiarity. Things don’t have to make sense simply because that’s the way it has always been. Take Jerusalem – the city that “kills the prophets and stones those sent to it!” From the viewpoint of the inhabitants of Jerusalem such actions were normal – they were protecting the orthodoxy of the faith, guarding the good old ways, keeping the city pure, defending against change. But from the viewpoint of a man of infinite faith from Galilee they were failing to be open to the word of God, were defending all the wrong things including that “fox”, Herod.

How many times have we seen the church over the ages fall into the same trap, and become all too sadly the new Jerusalem? Can anyone count or even describe the ways the church has defended against change, has cemented over the ears with ritual and practice, has failed to be open to the word of God, and has “killed the prophets and stoned those sent to it?” The church needs from time to time at least to be able to look at itself through the eyes of strangers, for only then can self-understanding and self-critique be truly possible.

But there is another reason why it is important for us to be able to recognize that Jesus was multilingual, lived in a multicultural world, and was indeed an “outsider”, a “foreigner” – and that is so that we can begin to understand the depth and breadth of God’s grace offered in and through Christ. If Jesus was the “purest of the pure” in terms of being one of Jerusalem’s religious elite, or even a truly righteous Judean, then it would make sense that God would be acting through him. After all, it would be totally reasonable that God should choose one of the “chosen” of God to be his agent of redemption, wouldn’t it? We could understand, even expect, that God’s redemption would be delivered through a high priest of the legitimate order of priests, or the top prophet among certified prophets.

But as Philip Yancy would say, “that’s what’s so amazing about grace.” Indeed, grace can even be defined as the forgiveness of God being offered for no reason at all. Imagine the implications of God’s forgiveness, God’s reconciliation, God’s redemption being offered through a foreigner, an alien, an immigrant! One can hear the puckering of kilts at the very idea! Sometimes I think our denomination should be renamed “the society for the preservation of the old white ways” – and if you think I’m exaggerating let me offer an example. In my role as Field Education Supervisor I have had the opportunity recently to examine the profile of one of our congregations – a church set right in the middle of one of Canada’s most multicultural cities – and that word isn’t used once! Not even the concept is mentioned – oh, to be sure, they want to reach out from “Fort Aberdeen” to the people in their neighbourhoods, but even that is a long, long way down their list of priorities. And hear me well,

I am not condemning them – instead I am sighing with Jesus, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Life is right there at their doorstep, and they cannot see it because they aren’t looking at themselves through the eyes of the foreigner, the alien, the immigrant.

And it’s that understanding that helps to make Jesus’ closing remark come clearer. “I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Until the people of Jerusalem can stop looking through the filters of their own limitations, their own strictures, their own pettiness and narrowness they will not be able to see the one bringing redemption from God. Until the people of the new Jerusalem, the church, can stop looking through their own inhibiting filters they will not see Jesus either. It is only when it comes clear that the only criteria that matters is whether the person or prophet – of whatever race, colour, or nation - comes in the name of the Lord that the blinders will come off, the filters will be removed, and the people of faith will be able to see Jesus clearly in the other, and rejoice together proclaiming “blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”