

“Through Outsiders’ Eyes” – Luke 13:31-35 – Lent 2 – Feb 28/10

“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, in spite of 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 here, although Jesus doesn’t use the exact term “unholy city”, all the same he is highly critical of Jerusalem. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” Whew! That’s not the kind of publicity that any Chamber of Commerce would like to have published! And Jesus continues ... “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 the temple, 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 guess we could say that had reason enough to be a bit bitter since his meeting Moses and Elijah on the mountain top and discovering what lay in store for him in Jerusalem. Already he has twice told his disciples what was coming and they still don’t seem to get it. Nonetheless his lament over Jerusalem still seems a bit harsh, a bit condemning, and we’re not comfortable with that image of Jesus which seems in sharp conflict with the usual picture of him as meek and mild.

Many of you have heard me claim that I understand Jesus with a different perspective. I didn’t invent it – I came to it from a book titled “Multicultural Christology” by Chun Hoi Heo who teaches Asian Theology at Knox College – our seminary in Toronto. In his book Chun makes a compelling argument that Jesus lived and carried out his ministry in a multicultural environment, and further that Jesus was most likely multilingual, and probably very fluent in Greek. He also emphasises 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.

Now just pause for a moment, and reflect upon Jesus as a Galilean – Jewish by heritage, even by temple ritual, but considered a gentile, 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, a stranger, 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 outsiders, 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.

And that is why we continue to be amazed by God’s grace - the forgiveness of God being offered freely, completely at odds with human logic. Think of the implications of God’s forgiveness, God’s reconciliation, God’s redemption being offered through a foreigner, an alien, an immigrant! Many within the church community are shocked by the very idea! Sometimes I think our denomination should be renamed “the society for the preservation of the old white ways.” Too many of our congregations are set right in the middle of rapidly changing demographics – a fancy way of saying the neighbourhood around them is being populated by new immigrants – but they don’t even mention the concept of multiculturalism. Oh, to be sure, they want their neighbours to come to church to swell the dwindling ranks, but they desperately pray that the newcomers won’t want to make any changes. Now understand that I am not condemning them – instead I am sadly 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 outsider, the foreigner, the alien, the stranger, the immigrant.

I believe that here at Central we have been blessed by being able to at least partially see ourselves through the eyes of outsiders. We are a remarkably diverse group of people, with a wide range of backgrounds and ethnicities, and we are much the richer for that. But we still have a ways to go, and a lot that we can learn by seeing ourselves through outsider’s eyes. Imagine for a moment that you are a stranger, not just to our church but to Vancouver or even to Canada. See yourself climbing the front steps outside, facing closed doors and wondering what lurks behind them. Will you feel welcomed? What subtle traps lie in wait to make you feel embarrassed?

Now imagine yourself as a newcomer, one who has been attending for a bit. Is it easy to become more involved in the life of the congregation? How easy or difficult is it to ‘break into’ groups or activities that already are active? How easy or difficult is it to offer your talents for new ministries and activities? These are the kinds of questions that we all need to be asking ourselves constantly, so that we can see Jesus in outsiders, and newcomers, and indeed in ourselves, and rejoice with them and with each other proclaiming, “blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”