

What would Jesus do? Luke 19:1-11

Reflecting on the St Paul's protest

"What would Jesus do?" has, for some years now, been the iconic question of Christian discipleship. It has though received public prominence in recent days as it stands daubed on the side of a protestor's tent in the churchyard of St Paul's London. I would not be surprised if the cathedral clergy had more than once wished for some divine manuscript of precise instructions to be followed in such circumstances, nor do I doubt that their underlying motives, however some may feel about their ultimate actions, are to reflect the attitude and values of Christ in their handling of the protest camp that they now find on their door-step.

But this is a useful question for us to ponder, not only in the handling of unexpected campers in our graveyards, but the various world events and economic realities which have given rise to this particular protest. We have to be honest and acknowledge that in this case "What would Jesus do?" is not so much an open and searching question, explored in a genuine attempt to more truly become like Christ, but more of a protest slogan, coined to imply that her founder would not approve of the way the Church is handling this particular crisis. I suspect that the campers are not alone in being more inclined to seek the mind of Christ against the assumption that He would largely agree with decisions and perceptions that are already held.

So what would Jesus do? The easy answer perhaps, is to say that Jesus would order society in such a way as to avoid a situation whereby individuals felt the need and inclination to protest against its ideologies. An attractive idea perhaps, but one that seems a long way from the Jesus we meet in the Gospels. He is born into a world in which many were calling for the overthrow of an unjust and unfair global system; one which forced a heavily pregnant girl to make a treacherous journey to a town where she was left to give birth in an animal shelter; a system which 33 years later condemned her Son to a criminal's death for daring to speak of a different world; it was a system which forced many of those who became his followers to live as refugee victims of persecution. At the outset of His ministry, Jesus deliberately rejected the temptation to seize the reins of power and impose his Kingdom from a position of legislative and political power.

And so we might be tempted to align with the more popular suggestion, implied I suspect by the current use of the slogan, that Jesus would pitch His tent with the protestors and true to His nature become one of them. As advent approaches, many I am sure will claim that this is the way that Jesus would make His dwelling amongst us. But I am not sure that God has entirely abandoned His people, or indeed the institutions which, for all their shortcomings, are nonetheless His Church. It was not that long ago that representatives of the very same institution were doing cartwheels in the aisles, such was their success in staging a Royal Wedding before a watching world – is it not indeed the Church being true to itself, when the self-same cleric who preached with such presence and dignity on that occasion, is to be found at an outdoor microphone seeking to engage with and persuade the outraged



campers? I can't help but notice the echoes of Christ's own engagement with a city that in the space of a week managed to shift from welcoming Him as a king, to screaming for his crucifixion

My own instinct is that what Jesus might well do is take himself off to Canary Wharf or perhaps Threadneedle Street to engage with those who are the real social outcasts in this story. Many I am sure will consider this an outrageous suggestion; how on earth could Jesus have time for the merchant bankers and fat-cat executives to whom we so enthusiastically attach the blame for our present dilemmas? But this is the Jesus who entered Capernaum and walked straight past the assembled crowds with their populist agenda, and didn't waste too much time on the Religious elite who were as unnerved as we seem today by such spontaneous expressions of public opinion.

Instead he looked out the one man who offered most potential for this particular encounter to become Good News to the poor; a man who, in his role as a chief tax collector, made him a pariah in the eyes of many. Jesus did not heap condemnation and judgement on Zacchaeus, nor did he offer a great speech calling for fiscal reform. Instead he connected with the town's wealthy tax executive at the point of their common humanity; he created the opportunity to share and listen, and through encounter with an incarnate God, transformation occurred.

This had an impact far beyond the individual concerned; those who had suffered unfair loss through regulatory failure received instant repayment; those who remained excluded and impoverished became the recipients of a shared windfall which amounted to half the value of an extortionate bonus system.

The central calling and identity of the Church is to be the Body of Christ; to bring His transforming presence to every place of influence and human encounter. Perhaps we need to renew our confidence in who we are, and recognise that this might ultimately be of greater significance than the organising or curtailing of a protest camp. Maybe the place we need to scrawl "What would Jesus do?" is not so much in the church-yard as in the boardrooms and dealing rooms of the square mile.

Transforming God;

In a world which is deeply troubled and wracked with uncertainty,

Expand our imaginations, we pray, to encounter afresh the possibilities of Your Gospel.

Where anger and dissatisfaction abound,

Give us the wisdom to speak Your message,

And to never confuse it with that which is simply our own.

Forgive the mistakes that have been made;

Envision and enable the change which is necessary;

And grant us courage and contentment in facing the realities before us.

Open the eyes of business leaders and politicians,

Ordinary citizens; winners and the losers,

To see the world as You would have it be,

And the part they might play in enabling its being.

May we not run away from that which is difficult and disturbing,

Nor rush to criticise those who struggle with its demands.

And so for all the complexities and challenges that confront us,

Help us to declare with confidence and wisdom

"Your will be done"

AMEN

