



Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Second Sunday of Lent

readings: [Genesis 17 1-7, 15-16](#); [Romans 4 13-25](#); [Mark 8 31-38](#).

25 February 2024

Cormac McCarthy was an American novelist who died last year aged 89. He told grim, violent tales of life stripped down to its bare essentials, to the fundamentals of existence. His novels are largely set in the American mid-west cowboy country. They range from “All the Pretty Horses” to “No Country for Old Men”. But perhaps surprisingly, for me that latter title is not I believe his finest work; that accolade I would give to “The Road”, written in 2006. This is a powerful novel portraying the struggle of a father and his young son to survive “on the road” in a world in which civilisation and the ecosystem have collapsed from catastrophe. It is a deeply pessimistic book about the inevitability of death, about a father’s angst about what will happen to his son, and yet it ends with the hope of redemption and renewal.

There are clear resonances here with the gospel story. For it can be argued that the whole of the gospel story can be seen through the lens of ‘roads’: not one, but three:

The Road to Caesarea Philippi, and the revelation of Jesus as Messiah;

The Road to Jerusalem, and the revelation of Jesus as Saviour;

The Road to Emmaus, and the revelation of Jesus as Risen Lord.

Today we are on the Road to Jerusalem, the Road to the Cross, an equally grim tale of violence and death, but one equally infused with hope of redemption and renewal. But let’s first cast our mind back to the earlier road, the Road to Caesarea Philippi. Jesus has been going about doing powerful things, the sick are healed, the lame walk, the blind see, the poor have good news brought to them, the crowds are ecstatic. On that road, Jesus asks his disciples, “who do they say I am?” And they tell him: “some say John the Baptist, some Elijah or one of the prophets”. But now he asks them, “who do *you* say that I am”. It is Peter who impulsively tells him: you are the Christ, the Messiah, the one sent to redeem Israel. And now it is the disciples’ turn to be ecstatic.

But now on the Road to Jerusalem their ecstasy turns sour. For Jesus begins to teach them that the Son of Man must accept suffering, violence, rejection, and death, before it can lead to resurrection. The realisation of what it all means hits the disciples: this is not the all-conquering hero warrior of a Messiah they were expecting, not even the radical revolutionary Zealot who would overturn the political system, but rather the Suffering Servant. The man they had eaten with, journeyed with, been taught by, is now telling them it is all going to end in tears, the dream is to become a nightmare, *this* road is going to lead to the Cross.

Peter can’t hack this, rebukes Jesus even for saying such things...and in return is himself rebuked. Peter is powerfully conflicted: on the road to Caesarea Philippi he is the one who comes straight out with it. When asked the question by Jesus “who do you say that I am”, he gets it right: “You are the Christ”.

But now on the road to Jerusalem, he is the one brave enough or foolhardy enough to challenge what he is being told, to voice the objections to the sort of Christ that Jesus was going to be, to protest against the idea of a Messiah who had to suffer, be rejected, be killed, in order to redeem. He is the one perceptive enough to recognise the contradiction in the concept of a suffering, dying Messiah.

How can you save the world if you’re dead?

Yes he always knew there would be risks in this public ministry of Jesus. He always knew how fickle in their favours crowds can be, how venal and scheming the power structures can be when their authority and privilege is challenged (it was ever thus, then and now). He had seen his role as the protection officer, guarding Jesus, minimising the risks ...and now here is Jesus talking openly about his death!

Yet through this interchange, Peter catches a glimpse of the bigger picture: that all this plotting and scheming by scribes and pharisees is part of a divine plan, not something beyond it, not something to be worked against and circumvented. It is all part of the divine necessity, part of the grand plan, part of the journey onwards.

It has been said that this gospel passage is the *hinge* on which Mark's gospel turns; the change from public activity of mighty works and healing signs, to predictions and portents of impending death. It is the hinge of a journey: a journey which had led north to Caesarea Philippi but which now turns south to Jerusalem; a journey which is now to be characterised not by mighty works but by intense instruction in the cost of discipleship; a journey that can only lead to Easter resurrection *through* the pain of Good Friday and not around it.

The Road to the Cross signposts the road that all who follow Jesus, all who will be his disciples, will have to walk. This is a Cross carried as a voluntary activity, entered into in sacrificial love and in the full knowledge of its potential consequences. A recent example: Alexei Navalny, militant atheist turned Christian believer, threatened for challenging those in power, arrested on trumped up charges, beaten and abused, punitively sentenced, unlawfully killed. Sounds very much like what happened to Jesus, doesn't it? He knew what could happen to him, as did Jesus. Yet he kept going, when others would have chosen silence, exile, safety. That example, like that of his Lord before him, teaches us that at the heart of Christian discipleship is commitment, a commitment to faithfully following the road walked by a Messiah whose own vocation to service carried him to Calvary. And that in Christ we have been given that assurance that whatever is asked of us on our earthly journey, we have in him the supreme example of how to bear it, not avoid it.

Some however would still argue that the role of religion is to protect from pain not create it, to erase suffering not endure it, that the Cross is an obstacle to be overcome, not a symbol of the divine plan that leads to resurrection.

When I was a boy at school way back in the 1950s (believe it or not) we read a set book by Richard Jefferies called "Bevis: the story of a boy". The boy Bevis had a bible with pictures in it, one of which showed the Crucifixion. That picture hurt his adolescent feelings very much: the cruel nails, the unfeeling spear, the agony of it all. Long he looked at it, and then he turned the page saying: "If God had been there, He wouldn't have let them do it!"

If God had been there ...there's irony for you. For the whole of our religion rests on the conviction that God *was* there, and that Calvary shows us how much it cost in suffering, to redeem a fallen world.

In a passage which I have long loved and often cited, John Austin Baker, former Bishop of Salisbury, who died 10 years ago this year, puts it like this:

"There is only one way in which with the world as it is, God could show himself good in respect of man's suffering, and that is by not asking of us anything that he is not prepared to endure himself. He must share the dirt and the sweat, the bafflement and the loneliness, the pain, the weakness, yes and the death too. *That* would be a God we could respect, a God who put aside all his magic weapons and did it all as one of us; a God who when we cry out in our misery 'Why should this happen to *me*?' can answer truthfully; 'It happened to me too, not because I couldn't help it happening, but because I chose that it should...because it was right'".

Jesus in his teaching of his disciples then and now, calls us to respond to God's will, calls us to take up our Cross and to follow him on the road, the Road to Jerusalem, the Road to the Cross, a road that will take us through the pain, not around it, and into the glorious light of his Kingdom that is to come.

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