

Reflection for 17th November (2nd Sunday before Advent)

There is a place on the Mount of Olives where, according to tradition, Jesus looked across at the city of Jerusalem and its magnificent temple and wept over it. The city whose name means “city of peace” had lost touch with God who was the source of that peace, and the temple which was supposed to be the meeting place of God and his people had lost its way.

The little church which was built on the spot is called in Latin “Dominus Flevit”, which means “The Lord wept” – it is even shaped like a tear drop. The church was built facing the site of the temple, so that as you look out through the clear glass window behind the altar you can see framed within it one of the best-known views in the world – the view of the old city of Jerusalem, with the golden Dome of the Rock roughly where the temple would have been in Jesus’ time. To share in a service of Holy Communion at that altar, with that view, as I have in the past been privileged to do, is a truly moving experience.

Perhaps this is also where Jesus was sitting as he talked with his disciples in our Gospel reading today: he was certainly, as Mark says, “sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple.” It seems that as he sat there, he tried to bring his followers to see that there was really no future for that grand temple building or for the inward-looking religious system that it had come to represent. Little wonder, then, that when Jesus was arrested the trumped-up charge that was brought against him was that he had sought to destroy the temple.

But what if we imagined Jesus sitting and looking at today’s people of God, the Church? Would he be looking with affirmation and congratulation – or would he look with reproach and despair, perhaps even weeping over it, just as he did over the temple? Have we fallen into the same trap that befell the Jewish religion at the time of Jesus, and which awaits religious people of all faiths – the trap of becoming inward-looking, more concerned with our own structures and systems than with reaching out to others?

God took the ultimate risk of the incarnation – the birth, life and death of Jesus as a historical person. And he calls his Church to take risks, too, and not simply be concerned for its own survival: survival for its own sake is not enough. Its hope for the future lies not in a vague wish that it might make it through the next crisis. The Church’s hope lies in its confidence in God: its expectation that God will, as has been the experience of Christian people down through the ages, fulfil his promises.

Bob Whittle