

**23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2015.**

**Readings: Luke: 19: 29 - 40**

**Ephesians 6: 10 - 20**

**Sermon: Let the Message Ring Out**

As Jesus approached the place where the road goes down to the Mount of Olives on His way to Jerusalem for the Passover, we are told that a whole crowd of disciples began to praise God for all the miracles they had seen.

They were calling out: **Blessed is the King who comes in the Name of the Lord** but their expressions of praise were met by objections from some in the crowd.

The Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus: **Teacher, rebuke your disciples** and Jesus' response was: **If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.**

That last verse: **If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out** came into my mind as I started to think about how I could share with you something I experienced while on holiday in former East Berlin.

When I was there in 1982, you couldn't help noticing the massive television tower in one of the squares off Unter den Linden. Unter den Linden is the street which goes from the Brandenburg Gate to Alexander Platz in East Berlin. Back then, as

now, there was a Church just to the left of it but no one could approach the television tower.

As I understand it now, it was more than just a television tower. There was also radar on top of it just to keep an eye on what was happening across the border in the west.

Near the top of the tower, though, there was a huge silver ball with two rows of windows around the centre of it which was presumably where the work was done.

On the first of those floors, there is now a viewing gallery and on the one above, a restaurant from which you can also see the whole of Berlin and beyond.

Last year, I was fortunate enough to get to eat in the restaurant. I met someone just outside the tower who was staying in the same hotel as me. She was just about to meet two friends who had moved to Berlin and as she had a table booked for lunch and a spare seat, she invited me to join them which was really kind. This year I only got as far as the viewing gallery but that was fine.

During the cold war, as I said a moment ago, you couldn't approach this building. I'm not even sure if you were allowed to photograph it because the East German government was very definite about what you could and couldn't do and photographing potentially sensitive structures

would not have gone down terribly well. Having said that, I think I have a photo of it from back then.

Something that was not forbidden, but was certainly not encouraged, was attending Church. The East Germans were allowed to attend Church but if they did, they had no chance of promotion or of doing further study at university which possibly kept many away who may otherwise have gone to Church.

On the other hand, however, the Churches were a refuge for those groups which had no voice and no freedom in the East. The Churches were a place of refuge for those who were unaccepted in the East. It was a place of refuge for those who were gay, for those who cared about the environment and questioned the amounts of pollution being produced, for those who sought reform and wanted to work towards peace and for those who were into punk music, to name but a few groups. The Church was a place of refuge for those who didn't fit the Socialist template. It was also a place where the religious education of children could continue when it was banned in schools.

The State, by and large, oppressed the Church to greater and lesser degrees during the Cold War but any attempt to silence the people of God was

thwarted. Much to the consternation of the powers that were in East Berlin, there was a constant reminder of the presence of God and of His people on the television tower and try as they might, they could not get rid of it.

When the sun shone on the big metal ball of the television tower, a cross appeared on it which would not go away, even when the surface was changed in an attempt to prevent the cross from shining out across the Socialist state. The cross remained and stood high above East Berlin as a constant reminder that God was in their midst, that God was there and could be trusted even when no one else could be.

Neighbours betrayed neighbours. Parents betrayed their children and husbands and wives, their spouses. Teachers would report families for wrongdoing. Even in Churches, there would be spies. No one could be trusted. No one was safe. There was one spy for every ten inhabitants in East Germany but the message of the cross was held high. The very stones cried out in praise of the Son of Man when so many others didn't. It was quite remarkable to see.

Our second reading today spoke about the armour of God. It spoke about the day of evil and of the struggle against the rulers, authorities and powers of this dark world. East Germans have

lived through that struggle and thanks to the Church they have come out the other side, free citizens within Europe and in a unified country although the latter is debatable, in some ways.

Paul talks about putting on the armour of God ready for battle and yet the battle that the East Germans fought was not one of bloodshed but of peace. By offering their premises to opposition groups like the peace movement, they were instrumental in bringing about the reunification of Germany without any blood being shed. They simply met and prayed and then walked around their towns with lit candles. That movement out of the Church building into the towns started in Leipzig and spread to other towns as thousands joined their ranks.

What has all this got to do with us? Well, somewhere in all of that is a message to us as a Church that with God's help and with peaceful determination on our part, we can change the world in which we live.

We are so fortunate to live where we do. In the Jewish quarter of Berlin, there is a police presence outside the synagogue and airport type security inside the building, which you have to pass through before you can access the building.

In France, there are individuals determined to kill and maim. In other parts of Europe there are

thousands of refugees being treated abominably by the powers that be. As one child said: Why are they treating us this way? We are human beings and we just want to be safe.

It is so easy to judge when we are living in the relative security of our own country, not that we are as secure in certain places as we would like to be. The question is: What are we as a Church doing about it? What are we doing to tackle the humanitarian crisis which is spreading across Europe? What are we doing as a Church to tackle ISIS?

We sit back and we expect our governments to deal with everything on our behalf but it wasn't the East German government that brought about the demolition of the wall. It was the silent peaceful protests and the prayers of the people themselves.

It is difficult to see what we can do and, to be fair, ISIS is probably not an organisation that we would want to take on because we would end up fearing for our lives. However, if the East Germans hadn't done what they did, they would very likely still be behind the Iron Curtain.

Can we really sit back and watch our countries disintegrate at the hands of terrorists? Can we really sit back and watch people who are afraid and who are trying to get a better life for

themselves being treated as they are? I'm not saying everyone can come and live in this country but there has to be a way forward which treats people humanely.

What we see on our TVs at the moment is the Syrians being turned back at the border with Macedonia. Is that right? That is what Switzerland did to many of the Jews who escaped from Germany. They sent them back across the border to their deaths. That is not how I would want our country to be remembered in history so what can we do to ensure that we are remembered in a positive way?

What the East Germans did was meet to pray. It was in those meetings that the transformation began. What would we like to see changed and what are we prepared to do to bring it about? Paul says: **Stand firm. Take up the shield of faith. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God** and above all else: **Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.**

Maybe if the Church was seen to be relevant to the world in which we live, maybe if the Church was seen to be outward looking instead of concerned with itself, maybe the Church would grow. Maybe people would join our ranks if they could see that we were fighting peacefully for

peace for people like ourselves, for human beings for whom God sent His Son, for human beings whom God loves. Does God need to put a big cross on top of a tower to get that message to those who need to hear it or can we take that message ourselves?

That is a question which we each need to answer for ourselves but one thing is for certain and that is that change can come through prayer but we need to be willing to put in the time and the effort. We need to be dedicated to prayer or the battle may be lost.