

If all goes well, a balloon will soon rise from the Esrange Space Centre in Sweden. It will drift high into the upper atmosphere – where absolutely where nothing will happen: the balloon will then return to earth. Nevertheless, a growing collection of environmental groups are fiercely protesting against it, including Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the Centre for International Environmental Law and others. The campaigners are against the flight because of what comes next. The balloon is a test flight for something called stratospheric controlled perturbation experimentation (Scopex), being run by scientists at the University of Harvard. The idea is that future flights will do geo-engineering experiments: that's deliberately fiddling with the earth's systems to try to counter climate change. The plan is to inject specially made reflective dust particles into the upper atmosphere to boost the amount of sunlight reflected back into space, away from the earth, helping to slow global warming.

The fierce opposition is for two reasons: the 'moral hazard' that, if the experiments work, it will reduce pressure to deal with climate change at its source by cutting greenhouse gas emissions. The second concerns something called 'termination shock': the reflective particles would have to be topped up indefinitely, forever. A sudden stop or failure would result in very rapid global warming, catastrophically reversing any good being done. Plenty of physicists say that this kind of solar geo-engineering is far too risky to contemplate. No wonder protests are growing in number and voice.

Why am I telling you all this?

Well, it is good to protest – you'll know the political adage that "strong opposition leads to healthy government". And today's gospel reading is one of two vivid scenes at the start of Jesus's ministry in chapter two of John's gospel. The first half of the chapter is the vivid story of the Wedding at Cana in Galilee, the first sign or miracle. Water into wine. With Jesus's life in us we too can be transformed and transfigured into glorious wine – the glorious people he would have us be. The second scene is this one we've heard today. The anger of Jesus in the temple. In the other gospels this account comes much later in Jesus's ministry, just before the crucifixion, but in John's gospel it comes right at the beginning, a taster of what's to come.

At a spiritual level it's a precursor: the destruction not of the temple in Jerusalem, but of the 'true temple': Jesus is the Word made flesh, the place where the glory of God has chosen to make his dwelling. The destruction of the temple of his body. Death on the Cross leading to life, life in all its fullness, for those who allow his life to infect and inhabit our life, your life.

But at a practical level Jesus is indeed protesting. He is protesting at two things.

Firstly, the keepers of Religion had failed to fulfil their universal mission to all peoples. They had made it narrow, nationalistic, exclusive. You see, God had spoken long ago through the prophet Isaiah saying that "my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations".<sup>1</sup> Now this 'house of prayer for all nations' was being jealously guarded, preserved. Jesus wants to do away with exclusivity. Salvation is not just for a choice few, but for all peoples.

The second thing that Jesus is protesting about? That temple practises and rituals had become corrupt and were now irrelevant in bringing people to an awareness and knowledge of God. All animal sacrifices and rituals, the blood and the mess and chink of moneychangers – needs to be replaced again with something

spiritual, the temple's *raison d'être*. Worship demands a lot more than just offering things to God in rituals. What God wants above all is the worship of our lives.

So in this season of Lent, and as we look towards the end of pandemic restrictions, it's good to ask, as Jesus gazes lovingly at you and me, what does he see?

What does he hope for – for us and from us?

Does my life, does yours, shine out as a life lived in faith and worship and love?

Are our churches/church families as inclusive as they should be?

Do we, as individuals and churches, do enough, protest enough, to bring an end to the evils which beset our world?

And what are the things that our Christian faith should encourage you to protest or be angry about, as Jesus protested violently in the Temple? I need to know more about solar geo-engineering before I choose to protest about it, even though alarm bells begin to ring when I hear that China and India are launching similar research.

What does your faith make you want to protest or be angry about? As history shows evil often triumphs because good people are afraid to speak out and protest.

When we hear of people being driven out of their homes or of the loss of animal species through greed and carelessness, surely we should be angry and we should act.

When we hear of the great rainforests being destroyed, and of 80% of the earth's farmland being used to raise livestock or grow crops to feed livestock – but that land produces just 18% of the world's food calories<sup>2</sup> – and all to satisfy our western addiction to having meat on the table every day, surely we should be angry and we should act what so many in our world are starving.

It was because he was angry with the slave trade that Wilberforce acted and, with others, brought about its abolition. Yet here we

are, so many generations on, and still the need for *Black Lives Matter* – surely we should be angry and we should act.

We shouldn't despair that we can't make a difference as individuals. As well as buying fairtrade goods to ensure that we are not perpetuating unfair wages and unsafe working conditions – or supporting local action, such as our foodbanks, to support those on the edge – there is plenty of prophetic protest that is simple to do – for instance to support the Cancel the Debt Campaign<sup>3</sup>, calling for our government's action to support the most vulnerable countries after the coronavirus pandemic (Christian Aid, Cafod, Oxfam); or signing up to campaigning websites such as r.ipples to be able to sign on-line petitions – like the current one to make permanently illegal bee-killing pesticides.

Gerd Theissen, German theologian, wrote this:

*We did not seek out this life. We were born without our agreement. Without agreement we received these parents and no other, this body and no other. And somewhere between cradle and grave, between our cry at birth and the silence of our death, we have to decide our response to the will of our creator.*<sup>4</sup>

Jesus's response, we know from today's gospel, was to challenge and turn upside down accepted standards which bring death not life. As we look to the months ahead, and a gradual leaving behind of pandemic, that challenge – to lead lives which bring in the values of the Kingdom in loving service – he hands to us, this Lent and in the time left to us this side of the veil.

Philip Banks 2021

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 56:7

<sup>2</sup> 'Our disappearing soil', *The Week* p1: Briefing 6 February 2021

<sup>3</sup> [christianaid.org.uk/get-involved/campaigns/cancel-debt-campaign-hub](http://christianaid.org.uk/get-involved/campaigns/cancel-debt-campaign-hub)

<sup>4</sup> 'Traces of Light', Gerd Theissen, SCM Press