

St Mary's Dorchester, Thursday 17th April 2025 i.e. Maundy Thursday.

Exodus 12:1-4 [5-10] 11-14

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

During Lent and Passiontide I've been reading and re-reading a little book that packs a big punch. The author, Timothy Snyder, is a historian; he specialises in central and eastern European history. His book is called "On Tyranny: twenty lessons from the twentieth century".

Each chapter of the book shows us what it looks like for a democracy to slip into authoritarianism. This happened a number of times in the twentieth century: we thought it would never happen again, but Snyder isn't so sure. He says that you can expect most of the change to be gradual; but then suddenly everything will shift overnight, and you wake up in a new world. I should say, he was writing this book in America in twenty-sixteen; I wonder what he makes of the last three months of American politics...

With all of this in mind, Snyder has put together a kind of toolkit for spotting the signs of tyranny. He suggests how you might stop the change in its tracks; and, when it proves to be too late to stop it, how to put up good resistance. Snyder describes the sort of person, the sort of community, that can resist tyranny. A few weeks ago in a sermon I quoted what he says about the difference between patriotism and nationalism. He says other things in a similar vein: to resist tyranny we need to be the sort of people who think carefully about the way we use words – and in particular, the way we talk about people who are different. We must care about the truth, and name lies when we encounter them. We must also care about how our neighbours are doing; and when we see our neighbours on the street, try to make eye contact and say hello. And if, as part of our work, our nation asks us to carry a firearm, we must retain the ability to think for ourselves and work out in advance the sorts of orders we will never obey. He gives good historical examples of how all of these things – and more – stop tyrants in their tracks.

Reading the book, I was surprised – I probably shouldn't have been quite so surprised! But the sort of person who can resist tyranny sounds a lot like a good Christian.

Resisting tyrants and saving one's nation are secondary objectives for a Christian. The primary goal

– to which defeating tyranny is but a means – the primary goal is love. In the face of tyranny, the cutting edge of Christianity is the love of one's neighbour. Successful authoritarians find all sorts of ways to undermine that love; unsuccessful tyrants find that love is their undoing.

This is what Jesus calls us to pursue in his final lesson, on the night he was betrayed. So he tries to wash his friends' feet; and he succeeds; and he says, "Do you know what I have done to you?" [John 13:12] And in another place he says,

Remember the word that I said to you, "Servants are not greater than their master." If they persecuted me they will persecute you; if they kept my word they will keep yours also. [John 15:20]

Jesus does not just give us words; he gives himself, "the Word made flesh". And he is most perfectly himself when he speaks and acts out the commandment which we remember tonight.

I give you a new commandment, [he says,] that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. [John 13:34-35]

Do we know what he has done to us? Jesus' commandment is the heart of Christian resistance in a world of tyrants and would-be-tyrants. The Saviour who is betrayed into the hands of a tyrannical empire is our Lord and our Teacher; he is the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith. And he never stops speaking truth; he never stops offering forgiveness; he never stops caring. Our task is to imitate him. This is what he has done to us.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.