

Hymns: **1** **“All people that on earth do dwell”**
 233 **“When Jesus came to Jordan”**
 350 **“I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship”**
 82 **“How great thou art”**

Readings: **Acts 10:34-43**
 Matthew 3:13-17

“GOD SHOWS NO PARTIALITY”

Today is Martin Luther King Day – he’d have been 88 years old if he’d not been murdered in 1968.

Thirteen years ago, by a strange alchemy that I’ve never understood, I formed part of a delegation from the US Congress that visited Selma in the State of Alabama. I was in the company of a group of veterans of the civil rights campaign, as well as Senators and members of the House of Representatives.

We all walked arm in arm across the Edmund Pettus bridge – so famous now as a part of American folklore. In our ranks could be found Harry Belafonte, Fred Shuttlesworth, Lynda Bird Johnson and John Lewis. The bridge forms a hump and when we reached the top of it, we stopped solemnly for a moment. I heard Congressman John Lewis point from our vantage point to the space at the bottom of the bridge towards which we were marching. “That’s when we saw what was waiting for us” he said. It was he who led the march that first, abortive, day. Martin Luther King was soon back to join them.

So what or who was waiting? A posse of violent men intent on doing mischief; they were armed with guns and teargas and batons and riot shields. Many rode horses or led barking dogs. It all ended in squalid misery.

And yet, as part of this effort, legislation was passed without much further delay that gave the black people of the State of Alabama voting rights they had previously been denied. I was beginning to understand the price paid by so many people to achieve those privileges for their fellow citizens.

We must think of those brave people and so many others like them, who put their lives on the line in the cause of righteousness and justice, fairness and equality, - all in search of that peace on earth which the angels sang about at the birth of Christ.

The story of Selma follows neatly on last week’s subject. Those of you who are here might remember that we were then thinking about Simeon. He was a determined old man, a Jew of the Jews, a man who’d lived for year in the temple in Jerusalem, his eyes and his prayers fixed obsessively on one hope. It was a Jewish hope. The Jewish answer to the plight of the Jewish people. He was looking for the Messiah – so long promised, waited for, yearned for, longed for by the prophets of old and in the

prayers of the people. Simeon was a Jew waiting for a Jewish hero to rescue his people from their misery and oppression.

I can't emphasise the Jewishness of Simeon enough.

When Mary and Joseph arrived with the baby Jesus, Simeon knew instinctively and at once that this was the moment he'd waited for. He found himself in a seventh heaven, on fire with joy, rapturous in his praise. YES!! – he must have said with an Andy Murray punch in the air. He's the one! He will be the glory of my people Israel. And so a Jewish dream was fulfilled.

But, as we saw in last week's sermon, Simeon's dream went well beyond his anticipation. This creaking old man found himself gazing at vistas much wider than those which related merely to Israel. He discovered that this could never be simply a cultic moment. It went well beyond a merely Jewish event. It was God's salvation alright, but an event with hope for all the peoples of the earth. For this child was destined to be a light to lighten the gentiles. Not only the Jews but also the gentiles.

So Simeon takes the same step as the one sought so many years later by Martin Luther King. It was the step that leads from a narrow exceptionalism, a tribal aspiration, a cultural hope, an outcome based on race and exclusivity, - to an open, inclusive, embracing and universal stance. It's a widening of the angle, starting with one's own culture but moving fast into broader perspectives. And that stance, adopted from the beginning of Jesus's life by Simeon, would make its demands on the followers of Jesus towards the end of his life. And it will get them to exactly the same hot water as those civil rights protestors in the mid 1960s.

Peter is in Joppa. Why? Jewish Jews had turned on Christ-following Jews with venom and violence. The Jewish Jews didn't see things the way Simeon saw them. Their Messiah would be a Jew for Jews only. They set out to exterminate these pretenders, the Jesus lot, to drive them out of Jewish society altogether. If necessary, they'd get rid of them forcibly once and for all. It's no wonder that the Jesus Jews including Peter, fled for their lives. And that's how he ended up in Joppa. He was running for his life, intent on keeping a low profile and hoping that no-one would recognise him.

And so it might have remained if Cornelius an officer in the Roman army, hadn't had a vision about him. He sent three of his soldiers over to Joppa with a simple message to Peter. "Come to Caesarea – I need you." This would have been a challenge to Peter. He was an observant Jew. He was hiding and fearful for his life. He'd have to come out into the open, have dealings with a Roman Officer, accept the hospitality of a gentile, and deal with his questions. On all those grounds people would have thought badly of him. He'd have been considered unclean. His activities unlawful. It shouldn't be done. He would have been bound by the law to desist from accepting this invitation.

Peter must have heard the request with some indignation. Instinctively, he must have wanted to send them packing. If he were alive today, I wonder whether he would use his Twitter account to get a message off quickly. Can you imagine how his Tweet would read? What about one of the following?

The Holy Spirit should spend more time fixing and helping Jews rather than asking me to undertake this mission#AllTalkTalkTalk #NoActionNoResults

That might be one. What about this one?

The Holy Spirit, one of the most over-rated influences in Judea, doesn't seem to know me very well and yet he has put me on the spot like this. He's a liberal flunky who's lost big time#SAD

Well that might have been Peter's instinct but he proved himself much bigger than that. He headed for Caesarea, accepting the hospitality of Cornelius, rejecting his critics' objections, making himself vulnerable to their persecution. It was an incident that ended with the baptism of the whole of Cornelius's household. Peter came out of hiding to do this. In his mind he came out of a narrowly focussed understanding of the role of the Christian community and ended with a much richer concept that he would then continue to work with.

The whole world is included within the reach and the appeal of the Christian message. And here this morning in the baptisms we performed, we have the whole world present. Just imagine. Three little ones:

- Alexandra, known fondly as Alexa, has her roots in Ghana. She takes her name from a Greek person who showed exceptional courage.
- Rowan of good old English stock. She takes her name from a common tree that grows profusely across the continent of Europe. Nice to think of our relationship to Europe at a time like this. The rowan tree is thought in popular folklore to protect us against evil forces.
- And Haim whose mum and dad hail from distant South Korea. His name is a Hebrew name and it means "health" and "well-being".

Three little ones from the continents of Africa, Europe and Asia. All baptised with water drawn from a stoop that originated in the Caribbean. Our baptismal font has the motif of broken chains carved around its edge. For the sacrament speaks of the possibility of breaking the chains of slavery in all its forms and especially our subjection to the tyranny of sin and death.

Yes indeed, a message for all.

As we crossed the Edmund Pettus bridge that day, I walked next to John Lewis. He told me of his feelings that fateful day in 1965. He was such a humane and humble man. There was no bravado about him. And yet he'd showed such extraordinary courage in walking into the valley of violence and hatred in the way he did. The words "John Lewis" in British society, of course, conjure up a different entity altogether. The John Lewis stores boast "we are never knowingly undersold". On a day when the President Designate of the USA chooses to impugn the character of such a man, we only hope that he will never under-sell himself by retaliating in kind. His readiness to give his best energies to a cause

that brought so many of his black fellow countrymen into the magic circle of the franchise was one of the great stories of the 20th century. And that vision of our belonging to a humanity the breadth of whose cause we must espouse even when it's at the expense of commitment to particular and narrowly focussed objectives of our own, shows the cost of discipleship. We must pray that we will know that courage in our lives today and every day.

Amen.