

I can see clearly now

Second Sunday of Lent, 16th March 2025

Readings [Philippians 3.17-4.1](#), [Luke 13.31-end](#)

‘At this stage of the crisis, it is important to be clear-sighted.’ [Words of Orysia Lutsevych](#), Ukraine expert at the Chatham House think tank. Being clear-sighted at the moment is not simple, however. Mr Trump may yet be the person who stops the killing in Putin’s war. He is also the person who talks about Canada in the way that Mr Putin talks about Ukraine. Like I said, not simple.

We may be in what the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* called an ‘organic crisis’, in which ‘the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born.’ So our world is complicated, perhaps more complicated than for a long time. But was the past that much simpler? Did everybody see things clearly then? Some pictures of the past say so.

I remember (I blush to remember) war comics that I read as a boy, in which things were very clear-cut, with the British and their allies clean shaven while the enemy sported a good two days’ stubble (and not the Chris Hemsworth / David Beckham designer variety). And only last Sunday, two of us were talking about how in old Westerns you could tell good cowboys from bad by the colour of their hats.

But no, the past was complicated too. Gramsci was writing in 1929; and as for the war, Churchill said that the only thing worse than fighting with allies is fighting without them. And the ancient past was no different.

Preachers can lazily oversimplify the world of Jesus’ day: on one side, Jesus (very good) and his disciples (good but goofy); on the other, the scribes and Pharisees (bad), whereas if King Herod had done a Galilean Social Attitudes Survey, he’d have found that Jesus’ views were closer to those of the Pharisees than any other group.

They, like Jesus, wanted the reality of God to make a difference in every corner of life. Where they disagreed was over how this would happen. Some Pharisees saw the solution in meticulously keeping the religious Law; some even believed that if every Jew could keep the Law just for one day, the Messiah would come.

No, said Jesus, God isn't waiting for everyone to keep the rules before getting involved, God is involved now; and if you can see clearly what's going on in what I say and do, then you will see God, and that will transform every corner of your life.

We see the Pharisees clash with Jesus over things that divide them, and we miss the things on which they agree, though we may get a glimpse of that today, when it's Pharisees who warn Jesus that Herod is after him. Jesus cares about God and God's people, like they do, whereas Herod – in their view – does not. So if it is to be Jesus or Herod, these Pharisees choose Jesus. Or, on the other hand (and in a complicated world there usually is an 'on the other hand') they might be just trying to put the frighteners on Jesus. Who can tell? Anyhow, Jesus knows where he stands. (Check out [last week's sermon](#), in which our preacher Steven Cooper vividly described Jesus' clear-sightedness when he is tempted in the wilderness.) And he knows exactly where he stands on Herod: 'that fox', he calls him – the one outright insult we hear from Jesus in the gospels.

Knowing where you stand in a complicated world – a big challenge, though there can be moments when you see things clearly. I remember how a moment of clarity came to me in a job I once had. I saw really sharply what mattered most in my work, what should be top of my list (and wasn't). It was a real insight. The problem was, I'd just accepted a new job, and I had just a few weeks left in the old one. So how can we find clear-sightedness while it's still worth having? The example of Jesus is instructive.

Jesus goes into the wilderness (as we heard last week) for a clear-sighted view of where he stands and what direction to take. But he goes there before he begins his work, so that when he is plunged into the complexities of the world he can keep his bearings.

We have just begun the season of Lent, forty-odd days of preparation for Easter that echo the forty days Jesus spends in the wilderness. But Lent, I suspect, doesn't come at the ideal time for many of us – not at the start of something, but in the middle of everything: all the stuff, big and small, that already fills your days. Or, on the other hand (that phrase again) life may already feel like a wilderness – large and empty – but it's not a wilderness you have chosen to be in.

Still, however God finds each of us, God says, During these days let me help you see clearly: see where you should stand, what direction to take – while there is still time. And how might God do that?

There is a tradition of giving things up for Lent. It's a good idea but it can turn into a religious form of self-help – cutting out for a few weeks what I should eat less of anyway – whereas the purpose of this giving up is to create space, not for me but for God; or rather, space for me and God to be together, space to face *my* temptations. Call it my wilderness of the heart.

Some of us are giving up time – just one hour a week – to join the Diocese of London's online Lent sessions [click [here](#) to know more and register]. It was rather moving, last Tuesday, to see people appear on the screen from churches all over London, England, even the USA, and even some early risers from New Zealand.

The space you clear for your wilderness of the heart can be big or small. If you have time, it could be a retreat or quiet day. It could be that single hour a week. It can be as short as a few moments' pause before you hit Send ➤ and fire off that email.

That space is not for you to check the spelling of 'TOTALLY UNACCEPTABLE' (or any missed opportunities for an exclamation mark) but to face your temptation: do these words spell out where I really want to stand? will they take things in the direction I truly want? will they help everyone see more clearly – or just add to the red mist? Maybe I'll put it in Drafts for the moment.

As I hinted at the start, all this is not only about our personal lives but our public life too. In today's story, Jesus laments over the whole city of Jerusalem, that place of business and politics and power where his destiny will be settled. In these coming days we are not only preparing for Easter, but facing serious public conversations. More money for defence means less for other things. Cuts, in other words, and every cut hurts someone. In fact, the most serious questions for citizens in a democracy are usually about who gets hurt.

That word 'citizen' pops up in our first reading: 'Our citizenship,' says St Paul, 'is in heaven.' This sounds like a lofty way of opting out of this uncomfortable earthy mess of life, but it's not. Paul (like Gramsci) writes while he is under arrest, so he can't opt out of anything.

Rather, it is a challenge to look at things from the end, to see the tangle of the present moment in the light of what God longs for us and our world to become. It is an invitation to ask ourselves: what can I do now, in the tangle of this world, that shows where I stand, what direction I want to take, and where my true allegiance lies?