

Exodus 16: 2-15  
Philippians 1: 20-30  
Matthew 20: 1-16

‘They looked to the wilderness and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud’

Words from Exodus

Our faith – the truth we proclaim – says that glory, God’s glory, is to be found in the wilderness.

I still find that remarkable.

A week or so ago I acquired a new book by a certain Maria Alyokhina. She’s Russian.

I had seen her interviewed on *Newsnight* and two things struck me about her.

Firstly, her striking good looks (!)

And secondly that she didn’t answer questions in any kind of conventional way.

There was an impressive – and somewhat alluring – independence of thought.

I had to have the book. It is titled *Riot Days*.

(And you may recall that the Dean said the other day that God is more like a riot than someone you might meet on the steps of the library!)

But who is Maria Alyokhina?

Maria Alyokhina rose to fame (infamy in fact) as a member of the Feminist punk band Pussy Riot.

She served time in the Russian prison system after the band performed one of their songs – uninvited – in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow with lyrics directly criticising President Putin and the Orthodox Church for its close relations with the Russian state.

The book doesn’t disappoint. I couldn’t put it down.

Scurrilous and lewd in places, it is a fantastic window onto activism of the bravest (and possibly fool-hardy) kind and an alarming window onto contemporary Russia and its prison system.

Anyone who thinks the gulags of the Soviet era are a thing of the past, this book – and it is only one book – makes you think again.

It's also surely a warning for us – in the context of tumultuous political times in the West – of what can happen if the Church gets too close to the state. The gospel is betrayed.

But what is also striking about the book – and this is the point that I want us to focus on today – is the deep sense of freedom – personal freedom – that Maria Alyokhina manages to convey even when she is behind bars, with the whole weight of the Russian state bearing down upon her.

That cannot have been easy – and this comes across.

A young woman in the vastness and kafkesque-ness of the prison system.

But Maria will not be cowed. She is free even while behind bars.

Surely that is glory even in the wilderness?

We have a reading from Philippians today. Philippians chapter one. Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Now, I suspect if St Paul and Maria Alyokhina had met, Paul would not have approved.

All those colourful balaclavas and frantic dancing, he would have found unseemly.

But they do have something in common.

Paul, like Maria, is speaking – is writing to the Philippians – from prison.

Paul has come to the attention of the Roman authorities and they have him in their clutches.

A sudden and violent death is a real possibility – indeed it's believed that Paul was martyred just a few years later.

And yet Paul speaks as a man unafraid. At peace. Free.

Listen to his words. They are remarkable.

'For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain'

'If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me'

And yet, he says, 'I do not know what I prefer [life or death]. I am hard pressed [to choose] between the two'

'[But] My desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better'

Although, Paul concludes, that what is needed for the Philippians' sake is that he 'remain[s] in the flesh', that he lives on.

So, hear it again:

'My desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better...But living is Christ too'

For Paul, this place of peace and freedom that he inhabits, it's a 'heads I win, tails I win' kind of place!

Thus, what one is hearing in Paul's writing, is a supreme confidence that God is at work.

Everything is heading in the direction of the salvation of the world – our salvation.

It may look as if Rome is in charge, or Russia is in charge, or the jailors are in charge.

It may look like Paul or the Philippians are under the cosh, or have their backs against the wall.

It may look – today – as if our political class is leading us to wrack and ruin.

But it's not the case.

Paul knows that it's not the case.

God's story – which is also our story – is working itself out.

Our salvation, the salvation of the world, is a step closer today than it was yesterday.

But here's the thing: can we, do we inhabit such a place?

A confident place. Confidence in God.

A place of peace and assurance – like Paul?

A place we also catch a glimpse of – remarkably – in the writing of Maria Alyokhina.

'My desire is to depart and be with Christ'

'Living is Christ'

'Dying is gain'

I think, if we are honest, most of us would find it hard to utter Paul's words – for ourselves and those whom we love – with unhesitating conviction.

My father is very unwell. He has a terminal cancer.

Whatever his particular thoughts on Christian ideas about death, he faces the prospect of his imminent destruction.

My mother, the loss of her life partner of 55 years.

Dying is gain?

That's hard.

And yet we can inhabit this place.

A place where we know that St Paul's words are true.

And where we can see – no doubt after much prayer and contemplation – that death is not the end.

That Christ walks with us now – in the trials and tribulations of life today.

And He waits for us. Gathering us to Himself – when the time comes – in His eternal embrace.

No prison. No jailors. No ill-health. No oppressive state.

Only light.

Julian of Norwich writes:

'If there is anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me'

'But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love'

This insight – Julian of Norwich's insight – is the same insight as St Paul.

Falling and rising we are always kept in that same precious love – God's love, the love of Christ.

Dying is gain.

Let us look to the wilderness – to those seemingly unpromising times and places – and see the glory of the Lord.

Amen