

The first reading today is among the most impressive of all the historical writing in the Bible. Its sobriety can only be compared to the emotionless description of the crucifixion in John's Gospel, where the beloved disciple makes only the most minimal reference to the horrific deeds that cradle the heart of the Gospel.

The unimaginable sacrilege is conveyed clinically: you probably could not have named him when you got up this morning, but his name was Nebuzaradan: *the commander of the guard, officer of the king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan, burned down the Temple of the Lord, the royal palace, and all the houses in Jerusalem.*

Jerusalem! Not only does the Psalmist tell us to observe her walls, to count her towers, and sense the strength of her fortresses: he rejoices that *the mountains surround her: so the Lord surrounds his people, both now and forever.* See how *the Chaldaean troops who accompanied the commander of the guard demolished the walls surrounding Jerusalem.*

What we are hearing described is the ultimate catastrophe: the slaughter of the heirs of David before the ritual blinding of their father, King Zedekiah, symbolically extinguishing the light for the promised land and the people of God.

Catastrophe is not, however, the lot of a few unfavoured souls, as we sometimes assume. It is the lot of the whole human race. The fact about us is that every one of us must face the mystery of extinction. It was the gift of the prophets to realise that the people as a whole might undergo the experience together, and that it would be as much according to the will of God as the death of any one of us is.

What we read in this mystery is the fact that without it, we might never understand our relationship to our maker, or the precious truth that life itself is a pure gift of grace, and not an incidental happening to which we are in some sense entitled. In the Gospel Jesus meets a man who has been obliged to accept the experience of catastrophe: a leper. His isolation from his fellow-human beings is a measure of his doom, but also of their inability to accept its meaning, their willingness to avert its truth and meaning for themselves. *Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him,* and in that moment his isolation is broken; but Jesus too will be isolated from his fellow-Jews on the day when he passes into the palace of Pilate on the vigil of the Passover, and is handed over to the pagans as is Jerusalem into the hands of Nebuzaradan. In this we can see how he gives himself to us, not in our prosperity or success, but in our foundering and failure: because it is in finding our way through this narrow gate that we will find our way to true life. Let us say with the leper, to this Jesus who came to find the sick, not the sound: *If it is your will, you can cure me.* It is then that we can hear his word, *Indeed, it is my will! Be made whole!*