

Views from the Pews - Other strands

The death by natural causes of the Rev Jesse Jackson gives us an opportunity to examine other strands of Christian life and witness. The mere fact that Jackson reached a ripe old age, albeit afflicted by a rare neurological disorder, will seem miraculous to many; Jackson was of course present at the assassination of his mentor Martin Luther King, and was always exposed to risk.

Jackson was a Baptist Pastor, part of an influential strand of church life, a strand very different from our own. He and his followers were content for faith, protest, and politics to overlap. This is hardly surprising as his people were largely descended from slaves; not immigrants, but people forcibly transported for their labour. Most slave –traders and owners would have proudly identified as Christian, so one task for this Lent might be to reflect on why this community of slaves and their descendants became Christians at all. Something about the Gospel message must have appealed so forcefully that perhaps they felt they had little choice.

Their faith has endured, and so has their energy and commitment to change their country. This after all was a community that at best was expected to be seen but not heard, and that at worst had a significantly higher risk of being killed just because of their ethnicity.

This strand of Christianity will seem very different to ours, beginning with the emphasis on the Word, on preaching, and with an understandable fascination with Moses and other biblical themes of exile, rescue and redemption. Jackson did not stay in his pulpit; his was a very defiant and political life including two attempts at the Presidency itself. Jackson followed King and others onto the streets. They were loud, sometimes abrasive (to our ears) and confrontational. For this version of Church, faith was not to be confined inside; it belonged on the streets. That will not be everyone's cup of tea. It may even seem alienating.

But here is a Lenten challenge – to follow Christ through the streets, beyond Palm Sunday – to Golgotha itself. This was public risk-taking that carried a terrible price. The challenge is to consider (and not necessarily approve) other strands of witness. Jesus' last days were lived in confrontation with authority; Jesse Jackson's Baptists will repay careful study during this season. Lent was not meant to be comfortable.

- Richard Swarbrick