

Setting Fire to the Earth OTC20C 2019

A commemorative event for the Peterloo Massacre that I attended (yesterday/Friday) evening drew parallels between the events in Manchester 200 years ago and some of the issues provoking calls for action against the injustices of our own times. From Hong Kong to Moscow, or striking School Students drawing attention to their pressing anxieties about the condition of the planet; people take to the streets in their thousands.

Frustrated by the inability or blatant unwillingness of those in power to address legitimate concerns and grievances, they take to the streets determined to be heard.

When those in authority feel threatened it doesn't take long for them to play the "public order" card and despatch the police, armed forces or undercover militia to quell the opposition sometimes by brute force. At other times they resort to disinformation, ridicule and cynicism:

Have you noticed how some of those who feel threatened by Greta Thunberg have been trying to undermine her, sometimes for her appearance, or implying that being autistic somehow impairs her intelligence. They even have the temerity to accuse her of seeking publicity by the choice of transport.

One recent critic pointed out that she is good at raising the issue but brings no practical solutions to the table. She has the perfect retort for this; reminding those supposedly older, smarter and more powerful than she is; that finding workable solutions is their responsibility. The fact that this young woman and her generation has so many detractors in positions of influence shows she has hit a nerve, and the powers that be will not surrender readily.

Across the ages the same tactics have been employed even against lone prophets like Jeremiah; who was accused of upsetting the people with his warnings that God's justice

might be visited on the population of Jerusalem for abandoning their integrity. Jesus, too, as we know so well was subjected to the ultimate state sponsored retribution.

Jesus' execution was no accident. He had an urgent mission, one which upset many an apple cart bringing dissension among families. He came to "bring fire to the earth" not for its own sake, not even for his sake, but for our sake and the sake of all who long for a world in which justice holds sway, where peace is more than the absence of war, where humanity harmoniously nurtures and shares the earth's bounty.

Jesus knew the likely consequences; he understood that his message undermined the credibility of the powers both civil and religious. Yet, as we heard in our second reading, he: "endured the cross, disregarding the shameful ness of it, for the sake of a joy which was still in the future."

This agenda is not Christ's alone for we are called to belong in company with the great cloud of witnesses envisioned in the Book of Hebrews; not because we know ourselves to be perfect; but because we allow ourselves to be captivated by the hope of a better world not just beyond but within history. Such a vision requires more than protest; it requires the naivety of youth, the strength of integrity, the power of love, the imagination of the scientist, the dexterity of the poet and a generosity that reaches beyond family, tribe and nation. Our future is at stake and it requires not just our mere occasional sympathy but the very best we can offer:

Protesters are still on the fringes like satellites, revolving around the system. But prophets and poets lead us into a new world, beyond simply yelling at the old one.

SHANE CLAIBORNE, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*