

SERMON – 20 JUNE 2020 – Jeremiah 20.7-13, Romans 6.1b-11, Matthew 10.24-39

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Three nice complicated passages of Scripture – just what I needed. I am rather regretting saying last week that “I’ll write a sermon next week”. I should have left it to Clive!

Scripture is complicated, scripture is difficult – but scripture has something to say to me, and (I hope) something to say to us. If we are men and women of faith, we have to have faith in these times that are dark and difficult.

Jeremiah the prophet is in dark and difficult times. He is confronting the Society he lives in with uncomfortable truths that it would rather evade. He is standing and speaking the truths he believes God is giving him, and society turns against him. He becomes a laughing stock, an object of derision. He gets angry with God because of where he is, what he’s facing. He wants to see God’s retribution, God’s anger to match his.

I do not claim to be Jeremiah, but I get a bit of how he’s feeling. I am so tired of being angry. I am angry that our country has handled the coronavirus crisis so badly that so many people have died. I am angry that millions of pounds have gone into the pockets of people’s friends and relations to produce apps that don’t work and source PPE that doesn’t exist. I am angry that a footballer has to campaign to make sure children are fed, but we can afford to repaint a plane. I am angry that shops and garden centres reopen, but our churches remain closed for worship – I see the owner of a chain of pubs has said he is reopening them in three weeks whether he has government permission or not, and I wish our bishops would say the same.

And with the anger goes the fear – do I want to reopen, do I want to meet people, do I feel safe, how will we manage, how will we worship, will our churches survive, are others doing better than me????

And this anger, this fear – and all the other emotions that I can’t even begin to understand – you feel like hiding away. Someone posted this song on facebook:

If you’re happy and you know it, stay in bed,
If you’re happy and you know it, stay in bed,
If you’re happy and you know it, getting up will surely blow it,
If you’re happy and you know it, stay in bed.

That should be my anthem for 2020 – and then I feel guilty. Guilty for those who are stuck in bed, guilty for those who are stuck at home, guilty for those whose pay has not arrived this month, who don't have a nice house, lovely garden, and lots of supportive friends. Guilt is as corrosive as anger, and the destructive cycle goes on.

So deep breath, stand with Jeremiah, and proclaim: “Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.”

OK, this week I have delivered a car full of food to a food bank – the lives of the needy will be improved by this (and by the work Harry and his team are doing feeding thousands in Newcastle). Evil is being beaten back. I have got one church open for private prayer, and encouraged those are doing a huge amount of work on our other church building – thank you. I also did a Diocesan Committee meeting on zoom (the church planning body), and we were able to make decisions that will help other churches use their buildings better for worship and mission – singing and praising the Lord will be helped by my input. I have phoned and chatted and encouraged – and done all of the things that I am good at. And you, in your responses, and your work, and your conversations, and your prayers – there is lots of good, and the evil doers are being fought and defeated.

Let's move on to Paul. In his letter, he is contrasting sin and grace. We can easily define “sin” - my favourite definition of “grace” is the free and unmerited favour of God.

Paul knows, as we all know, that sin is a reality. Our world is a place of pain and suffering, our lives are not always easy – and we have it so much easier than most of the population of this planet – and death is the inevitable end. Paul knows, as we all know, that sin is a reality in our lives. I'm a pretty nice human being, I am calm and lovely – but I am capable of sin, as we are all capable of sin. I remember a lovely Dave Allen sketch many years ago – a monk sitting on a bench. Calm, peaceful, reading his book, halo, brightly shining. A beautiful young lady walked past. The monk looked up from his book and his eyes followed her. The halo slipped from his head to his neck, and he was being throttled by his sinful thoughts.

We may feel guilty, we may know we have done wrong, but the power of sin is an incredible power. It may be an individual who knows that what they are doing is wrong, but they continue to do it. It may be people living in a society where we know so much is sinful, yet we continue to collude with it, because we're doing OK. It may be that relationship we know needs to be healed, but we

haven't got the energy to put the effort into healing it. No says Paul, do not continue in sin, trusting that God's grace will sort it out.

You are baptised into death, you join with Christ in the fight against evil. When I baptise I always remind mum and dad that they will fight for the best for their child, they will need to forgive their child, they will need to ask for forgiveness for themselves, and that both they – and their child – have the God-given ability to make this world a better place. When we look at our children and grandchildren we often see that they are lovely human beings who are working to make this world a better place – and we should rejoice in that.

We are baptised with Christ in his death, and “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” I would love all our baptism families, all our families, to make church and the worship of God a regular and important part of their lives – to walk in newness of life. Then again I'd like all those people who say they are part of the life of St Edmund's and St Matthew's to make church and the worship of God a regular and important part of their lives – to walk in the newness of life. It is a challenge for us all.

Most of us have been Christians for decades. Some of us will have been attending church pretty regularly since our first days here on planet earth. We came first because we were bought, at some point we made a decision we wanted to come. We were first told about Jesus, often by mum or dad, granny or grandad, and we have come to accept him as our Lord and Saviour, a constant presence in our life. Or we may have drifted away, then drifted back – or we may have made a constant decision that this is what we want to believe, that Jesus is a vital presence in our life, that worship together brings a sense of fulfilment.

It does make me wonder whether a three month (or more) break in coming to these buildings to worship will have a permanent effect on our congregation and our worshipping life. Will we find that some simply stop because they've lived perfectly well without worshipping for several months, and they don't bother coming back. Will you come back? Will you come back if we're told we can't sing? Will you come back if we can't sit and have coffee together? And if you're desperate to come back, but can't because of a medical condition or fear of being together, then how do you remain connected in the worship of Jesus Christ, and how do we help you stay connected?

These are, of course, not just challenges that the church faces. I had a smile looking at twitter and seeing that English Heritage and the pagan community are having the same problem in supporting those who want to gather at Stonehenge

for the summer solstice, when they can't. It will be a challenge for all of Society as to how we support the lonely – this was a huge challenge before Covid, and now it's horrendous. How do we rebuild the economy, how do we rebuild society – “If you're happy and you know it, stay in bed”, sorry, that's not an option!

The Gospel reading challenges us too. The disciple needs to learn, the slave needs to work. Don't believe that the devil is in charge – he has been defeated. You do not need to fear – have faith to live your faith, have faith to proclaim your faith. When you face opposition – and you will, many Christians face horrendous opposition as they live their faith in this world – when you face opposition, God is with you. He knows the sparrows, he has counted the hairs on your head – and I've got a lot of hairs. When I see the lovely Sophie in three weeks' time when the hairdressers reopen, she is going to have her work cut out sorting me out!

“So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows” – if you are afraid, remember those words. If you are not afraid, pray for those who are. Acknowledge Christ as your Lord and Saviour, and share that love with others.

Our churches have a huge amount of experience in bringing people together. We have a huge amount of experience in loving and supporting people. We know how to support the needy and challenge the evil doer. We have resources, we have a long view, and we keep going.

Two examples to encourage us. When I preached on this passage three years ago, it was a fortnight after the fire at Grenfell Tower. You will remember the huge amount of work that was done by the church of St Clements, next door. Three years ago I quoted an article by Giles Fraser:

We are an “unsuccessful church”, the exhausted Rev Alan Everett told me, as I persuaded him to take a break and have some lunch. He meant that they only get 30 to 60 people in the pews on a Sunday morning and that it wasn't one of those whizzy Alpha course churches beloved by London bishops and their growth spreadsheets. Next to us in the church's sunny courtyard, an extended Muslim family talked openly about their escape from the fire. “Our lungs are full of smoke but at least, thank God, we are all alive.” A church worker told them where to find new shoes and clothes. It felt like a refugee camp. Perhaps it was a refugee camp. And hanging over the whole scene, Grenfell Tower, black and enormous. It stands as a biblical-scale condemnation to a whole society.

In the days after the fire, the church of St Clement's, Notting Dale, became a hub for grieving families, generous donations of clothes and food – and

camera-ready politicians. First Jeremy Corbyn came. Then a furtive Theresa May met a few residents in the church. Then Sadiq Khan was at mass on Sunday morning. I wanted to know from Everett how the church was able to respond so quickly in a way that the council didn't. "I was woken up at 3am by a priest who lives in the tower, and so I came down to the church, opened the doors and turned the lights on," he said. It all began from there. People started coming in out of the dark – often passersby looking to help. First they sorted out tea and coffee. By 7am, they had a fully stocked breakfast bar, with volunteers organising themselves into teams. Within hours, local restaurants were delivering food; clothes began to pile high in the church sanctuary – about 40 Transit vans' worth, the vicar estimates. The place looked like a warehouse.

Three years on the work continues. Their website tells me that a new priest, the Reverend Gareth Wardell, has just become their minister. The church talks quite openly about the exhaustion they all felt, all feel, three years on – and how they need to stop and start, and move on. They can't welcome their new Vicar with a big service, a party, excitement and cake – but they will continue to work together, and care for their community. "If you're happy and you know it, stay in bed", that's not the option that church and community beside Grenfell Tower have taken.

I also read the parish profile for a Team Vicar for the Lordsbridge team ministry just outside Cambridge. No, I'm not going to apply, but Barton, one of the 11 villages in the team, is the village where I lived as a child and a teenager. When we moved there in 1969 I was 6. Mr Law was Vicar of Barton. He lived in a huge Victorian vicarage and was as old as Methuselah. (Actually he was just a couple of years older than I am now!). I remember the anger when he had to be Vicar of Coton, the next village, as well. There was a Vicar in Haslingfield, another one in Comberton, one in Toft (and he was a violin maker. My mum was a music teacher, and I remember going with her to the huge Victorian vicarage and being directed to a shed at the bottom of the garden, where this craftsman was at work). Forty years on and there are two full time clergy for 11 villages, and that's all. A tale of change and decline – "change and decay in all around I see".

Read the parish profile – and it's not like that. Yes, there are challenges, but there are 11 congregations meeting in traditional churches, plus others that meet in a village hall, a residential home. There is work with youngsters, there is work in all the schools, there are Christians deeply embedded in the life of their villages, there are a huge number of people working and ministering and serving, and there is hope.

I was also really chuffed when I read that “in Barton there are very good relations with the Baptist Chapel.” When I was a child I was in the Baptist chapel Sunday by Sunday, I only went to the parish church with the school on major church feast days. My dad was the Baptist deacon who worked really hard on ecumenical relations in the village, bringing church and chapel together – and it is great to see that those seeds he planted are flourishing 40 years later. It’s also lovely to read that the children of Barton school cross the road to the parish church every week for an assembly in church.

So be encouraged. We can do this, we will do this. We are churches that show the grace of God in this suffering and sinful world. We are all called by God to offer that grace – and our work brings the Kingdom of God closer. We could all do better, of course we could, but never downplay the grace of God at work in our lives and the life of our church.