

SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND JONATHAN ANDREW
AT 8 AND 10AM SERVICES OF HOLY COMMUNION ON 17 FEBRUARY 2019 –
THE THIRD SUNDAY BEFORE LENT

Jeremiah 17:5-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

There's one big question that underlies all three of our readings this morning, and that big question is 'Where do we place our trust?' The readings challenge us to ask ourselves whether our true reliance is on the God who created us, sustains us, and ultimately in Jesus destroyed death for us, or whether we behave as if we can rely on ourselves to give our lives purpose and satisfaction.

And so our opening reading from Jeremiah painted us two contrasting pictures. The first picture is of a withered shrub struggling to keep going in a dry, hot, salty desert. Stunted by its environment, it can't even take advantage of refreshing rain when it does come. Are we like that shrub, hunkering down, hanging on to whatever security we can create for ourselves, our hearts so inward looking that we cannot truly respond to the rain from heaven, the calling of the Lord?

Or are we more like Jeremiah's second picture – the flourishing tree, with roots going deeply into the rich moist soil of the riverbank, ready to survive the challenges of heat and drought, the difficult times – our energy and confidence unabated, with green leaves shining and bearing fruit, spiritual fruit that will last.

The Old Testament has many passages that compare blessings and curses, as Jeremiah does here - the blessings that come from following God's commandments, the accursedness that comes from stubbornly doing our own thing. In the Old Testament these passages are often linked with the idea of 'covenant', the exchange of promises that cements an enduring relationship – the people's promise to obey the Law of Moses, and God's promise that, as long as they continue to do so, they will live long and prosper in the land. Not exactly a contract, but a relationship of mutual commitment and trust.

But by New Testament times thinking had moved on. Our reading from 1 Corinthians, like many passages from that letter, is somewhat frustrating. We know that in his letter Paul is replying to a letter from the church in Corinth, a letter that asked a number of questions. But unfortunately that letter has not survived, and so we are left with only one side of the correspondence. But we can fill in some of the gaps. We know, for example, that the early church was not (in worldly terms anyway) exactly 'living long and prospering in the land'. The church was a small minority, out of step with the world around it and subject to suspicion, hatred, and even active persecution. But, even in that context, debates continued about key aspects of Christian belief – indeed it seems that some Christians in Corinth were following the old arguments of the Sadducees that this is the only life there is - there was to be no general physical resurrection.

And so Paul responds, arguing strongly that belief in the resurrection cannot be considered an 'optional extra' in our faith. He argues that, if there is no resurrection, then the whole edifice of the Christian faith collapses. What possible reason could there be for voluntarily accepting suffering on Christ's behalf? Where would the fruits of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience and so on – fit in with in that? Our faith would then be a bitter sham – simply following our duty, with the only benefit being our own sense of self-congratulation, combined probably with a sense of bitterness and a feeling that 'I'm-being-put-upon'. No, says Paul, trust in the God who raised Jesus from the dead and who also wants to give us eternal life – then the trials of this world are bearable.

And so we turn to our Gospel reading - that passage in St Luke, at the beginning of what's often called 'The Sermon on the Plain'. We looked at this passage a few months back during the Bible Course and compared it with a similar passage in Matthew at the start of his 'Sermon on the Mount'. Luke's version is sometimes considered rather the 'poor relation' to Matthew's with its somewhat more prosaic tone:

- “Blessed are you who are poor” in Luke rather than “Blessed are the poor in spirit” in Matthew; and
- “Blessed are you who are hungry” in Luke rather than “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” in Matthew.

But I don't think we have to choose - I prefer to read the two accounts as different but complimentary teachings for different purposes, in different contexts. In Matthew, Jesus is talking to the crowd, people like ourselves who need focussing on the world of the spirit, on righteousness, but in Luke Jesus is speaking specifically to his disciples, the shock-troops of the coming kingdom whom he has just commissioned. His twelve disciples, the new Tribes of Israel, have indeed given up everything and taken up a life of poverty, hunger and suffering, trusting in their hope of resurrection in God's future when he will make all things new.

But, however we read them, all three of the passages we've heard this morning must be considered as revolutionary in tone:

- Against any assumptions of trusting in good government, be it the divine right of kings in his day or the primacy of the democratic will in ours, Jeremiah warns against relying on human authorities,
- Against any theology of trusting God to keep us safe, living long and prospering in the land, Paul makes no promises about this life and tells us that the resurrection life is our true destiny, and
- Against everything we trust in our comfortable day-to-day lives, Jesus teaches that our apparent misfortunes may be blessings in disguise, and our blessings mere distractions from the business of heaven.

All three readings urge us to trust in a world turned upside down, or perhaps more accurately in a world turned right way up!

Amen