

## Trinity II (25.6.17)

**Jeremiah 20:7-13; Rom.61:b-11; Matt.10:24-35**

As you know, before coming into parish ministry, I spent eleven years as a university chaplain. One of the challenges of that job was dealing with the Christian Union. Not all Christian students were part of the CU, but it was always a big and vocal part of the Christian community on campus. So much so that often everyone else would think if the CU said something, well that must be what all Christians thought. And that posed me difficulties, because they said some very strange things. They said, for instance:

- That evolution was just a theory, and maybe the world was made in seven days
- That everything the Bible said about God was true – even the bits where he commands Israel to slaughter men, women and children.
- That women shouldn't teach men in church: that even in small bible study groups ideally a man should be in charge.

I must say in fairness that they didn't *all* say these things – but enough of them did to cause a chaplain trying to represent Christianity to a sceptical University embarrassment and difficulty. Just for the record, all those things are daft.

Anyway, one of my most jaw-dropping CU moments came when one of them assured me that the word Gospel does not actually mean, as you will have heard many times, 'Good News.' The Gospel, he told me firmly, was *not* Good News. No. The Greek word *euangelion* meant something quite different. It meant Big News. Important News. World-Changing News. But not especially *Good* News. There's nothing here to especially pleased or happy about.

Now, we can leave the technical question of what exactly the Greek word means on one side. I suspect there's a little more cheerfulness to it than the student was allowing. But the reason that conversation is fresh in my mind this week is because studying this week's readings, part of me suddenly thought: 'Gosh – he was right!'. Listen again, after all, to Jeremiah: *the word of the Lord has become to me a reproach and derision all the day long. All God gives me to say is judgement, all I can do is shout out judgement and destruction against this wicked world. And unsurprisingly, nobody wants to know: I have become a laughing stock all the day long; everyone mocks me.* A few verses before we started reading, Jeremiah was in the actual stocks – sweltering in the sun, having insults hurled at him, no doubt being physically pelted with all sorts of rotten stinky stuff. There was no good news for him or anyone else.

And then listen to Jesus. *A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave the master. If they've called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!* In other words, look: they called me, Jesus, a devil – just imagine what they're going to do to you. If you follow me, if you do as I say and teach what I teach, well you are heading into a storm. Things will be so tough that you'll want to keep your faith secret, you'll want to whisper it in the dark, sometimes you'll even want to deny you know me. They'll threaten you, sometimes they'll even kill you. Even your own families won't get it, and sometimes you'll be forced to choose between me and them. I tell you, following me is like lifting a great, big, deadly cross. People will hate you and they'll want to kill you. You'll be throwing your life away. So come on then: follow me.

Not much good news there. You will be unsurprised to learn that in the Making New Disciples section of the MAP, I do not propose majoring on such themes. Instead, we will tell people there is Good News. We will tell them God loves them, that He forgives them, that there is hope, that because of Jesus we are all our way to eternal, brilliant, glorious joy. And that meanwhile the church is a lovely, friendly, welcoming and hopeful place to be. And all that of course is true – really true – but this morning’s readings bring us up short. Because if that is the whole story, why would anyone oppose the church? Why would anyone persecute it? And if that’s all Jesus was about, why did anyone crucify him? At the very least, these readings suggest that if our faith never provokes hostility, if our church never faces the slightest hint of persecution, then we’re probably getting something wrong. Jesus did seem to expect that at least some of the time, following him meant trouble ahead.

Well, what might it be about Christianity that brings out the hate? Or what might it be that our very comfortable, very at peace, very un-persecuted church has got wrong, or neglected? The readings suggest two things, and I suspect there’s probably at least one more:

1. Why does Jeremiah find himself in the stocks? Fundamentally, because he had been telling people who did not want to be told that God will judge them. That ultimately we will be *accountable* for what we do with our lives, *answerable*. We are not our own masters, we do not know best, and all choices are *not* equally valid. Jeremiah’s society, and especially the powerful people within it, had chosen a particular set of policies without regard to God – and Jeremiah says that therefore there will be disaster, be judgment. Jesus, incidentally, teaches exactly the same thing. Unsurprisingly, both of them found this was an unpopular and dangerous move.

It remains so today. Calling somebody ‘judgmental’ is about one of the worst criticisms you can make – we *hate* to be thought of as judgmental, and we fall over ourselves to say that God is not judgmental. The reasons are obvious: because in the past the Church has got judgement so terribly wrong. Because we’re hypocrites.

Because we're called to forgiveness and mercy. Because people's lives are complex, and human judgement tends to be simplistic. All true, and all good reasons to be careful. But *not* good reasons to deny what the Bible and Jesus clearly teach – that God is our Judge, that we will answer for what we do, and that in the end *not everything is OK*.

2. Number two: this God, this Judge, the one who claims the right to define how human life should be – he has a human face and name, and that is Jesus of Nazareth. Look at the spectacular things the Gospel reading says about Jesus. He is the master, we are the slaves. If you deny him before human beings, he will deny you before his Father. Loyalty to him should come before loyalty even to family. For his sake, you should lay down your life. Now on the lips of anyone else, we should call this the most unspeakable arrogance – and it runs right throughout his teachings:

*'You heard Moses say, an eye for an eye, and a tooth ... But I say to you, turn the other cheek.'* ... *I say.... forget Moses.*

*'Let the dead bury their dead, as for you follow me.'*

*'I am the Way, the Truth, the Life; no man comes to the Father except through me.'*

What spectacular ego. How dare this man say such things? Who made him God?

And this is why we can't say – as the world would so much like us to, and perhaps even we might want to – that He is just another good teacher, another poet of the spiritual life, like Buddha or Muhammad or Guru Nanak. No. Whatever might be good and true and wonderful in those figures – and there is much – Jesus is different. He is the Incarnation of God. His birth, his death, his resurrection are the most important things in all reality. He is the centre, the burning Sun around which all else must move, in whom all people – even Buddha, even Muhammad - must find their meaning. Jesus is the Judge: one day every knee bows to Him.

Now there's an unpopular position. It seems arrogant. It seems disrespectful. Perhaps it's even a threat to world peace, the kind of thing Christians might say before they set off on Crusades. And as with judgement, all these problems are real. But as with judgement, it is also just basic Christian teaching. It's one of the things that got Jesus crucified, and which He knew meant trouble for his Church. If we would rather have a quiet life and forget his claims and not offend anyone – well that's fine. But it is not Christianity. Jesus might say: I tell you, if you love being thought well of more than me ... you're not worthy of me.

3. Number three is not in these particular readings but is there in so much of the Bible that I can't leave it out. The Church will offend people, will provoke hostility and persecution because it will bang on and on and on about the poor and the weak. It will constantly irritate a society like ours – and especially the rich – by saying that if you put people in substandard housing and skimp on the fire-safety to save money, if you pay people less than a living wage for their labour, if you just accept the fact that kids born in one postcode have worse and shorter lives than those in another: well Jesus is your Judge, and vengeance is mine saith the Lord. A society built like that is doomed, and deserves to be. And the individuals who make it that way are in grave spiritual peril.

And what's more, lest anyone think that being a Christian is just about echoing the *Guardian* newspaper, the Church will also bang on about those who don't feature on any fashionable political radar – for instance, the 190,406 unborn children aborted last year in England and Wales. 190, 406. Now *please* don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that abortion is always wrong. I'm not saying it should be illegal. So many of these situations are difficult and painful and complex. Some of you will have experienced them first-hand, and I would not presume to say what you should have done. But I will say, and I'm bold enough to think Jesus would say: those 190,406 lives really matter. That death toll is way, way too high – and our society is in deep, deep denial about it. A church being faithful to Jesus needs to keep on saying so, and it will become deeply unpopular in the process.

Right: that is probably enough challenge for one morning. In my defence, they were challenging readings! Back to the beginning: my CU student was wrong. The Gospel *is* Good News: it is *Happy* news. God is Love. He became flesh in Jesus, and if we let him, He will transform our lives and carry us to all to eternal joy and beauty. It's all true. All wonderfully true. And you will hear me saying it many times.

But this morning was time for the other side of the truth. If we really take Jesus seriously, if we really begin to think like he thought and act like he acted ...well, we will indeed be on the way to glory, but there will one heck of a rough sea to get through first. People will laugh at us. People will mock us. They will think we are wrong and wicked, and they will bitterly, perhaps even violently oppose us. We are in good company, because they did it to Jesus first. So come. Take up your cross, and follow him.