

SERMON FOR TRINITY 9 | 18.08.2019

Jeremiah 23: 23-29; Hebrews 11: 29 – 12: 2; Luke 12: 49-56

Right now I think we could all do with a break! The weather has been rubbish, our national and international politics are as grim as ever – and we come to Church to hear Jesus say *I come to bring fire and judgement to the earth – and how I wish it were already set alight...*

In last Sunday's sermon we watched the BBC news clip on the screen showing how the Dean and Chapter in Norwich had set up a huge helter skelter inside the west end of the Cathedral, inviting people to climb the 40' tower at £2 pop as part of their exploration of the building. Talking to our congregation afterwards I am not sure you were convinced it was a good move: wouldn't people just come for the fun and forget the bigger questions that religion and faith have to offer? Or was it a good move to engage with people who wouldn't ever darken the doors of a Church, to at least start the conversation? Time will tell, I guess.

But as Maria and I looked at the fabulous wedding photographs that our daughter Catriona and her new husband Daniel shared with us last night, I couldn't help remembering holding her as a very small baby and recalling all the hopes and aspirations we had for her back then as young parents. She was a bit premature and that made those thoughts even more telling as we wished for her to put on weight and to thrive. And as we stood at the font and asked for God's blessing on her then, did he have her in the palm of his hand and would he look after her and guide her, as Psalm 23 says, *in the paths of righteousness, all the days of her life?*

Does God have a plan for each of us and how do we know we are sticking to what has been sketched out for us? Or is that too controlling: hasn't God given us complete free will to do and say what we like, when we like?

You won't be surprised to hear that this is not as binary as it sounds: it isn't one or the other. But today's readings certainly invite to think about Providence and how that fits with the freedom that God gives to all his children.

Everyone knows the Laurel and Hardy line: *that's a fine mess you got me into...* and it is worth stepping back into the beginning of the Bible and reflecting on the way the first theologians wrote about the way God planned the universe – earth, sun, crops and animals – in a logical form and with that repeated phrase: *and behold, it was very good*. That was to be the bedrock for our confidence in God. All things were made perfect and for our enjoyment.

But it wasn't long before such confidence was sorely tested as reality struck and things went terribly wrong. Yet the Biblical tradition is relentless. Even when Job sits on his own in a pile of ashes outside the ruins of his luxury house, the abiding message is: *in the middle of this unthinkable disaster, God still cares for him*.

Or on a bigger scale altogether, what was the ministry of Jesus all about if it wasn't putting right at the centre of the world the perfect example of someone who lived and died with that supreme confidence that his Father God knew what he was doing. For three years his message was the same: if we care for one another more than we care for ourselves then the plans of God will ultimately come right – even though the details of that plan may be almost entirely hidden?

But - you are asking, and I am asking: how do we maintain confidence in an overall strategy for good when there is so much sadness and so much seems 'out of control'? What do we say to console Nora Quoirin's parents after her naked body was found by the waterfall in the middle of a Malaysian jungle?

What comfort is it to know that 'the world is a mix of order and chaos' as the text books tell us? More challenging still, how do we work through the ancient teaching that we will receive God's providential grace, hope and peace in the middle of the darkness as well as in times when we are bathed in joy and happiness - like the moments when were poring over those photographs from the wedding?

Two stories: Ben Kwashi is Archbishop of the city of Jos which lies on the fault line between the Muslim north and the Christian south of Nigeria. Trouble arose in the city between the two communities and a whole score of churches were burned down.

A bunch of very angry young Christian men poured into the Archbishop's compound and demanded that he tell them what to do next. Should they go out into the streets and start burning down mosques and the homes of prominent Muslim leaders? *Tell us, they said, tell us now, what we should do.*

***Wait until I have prayed,* said the Archbishop, and he went into his chapel and locked the door. For hours he paced up and down the small room, looking for the right way forward and eventually he came out with a scrap of paper in his hand which he had signed.**

The young men were jostling all around him, expecting a manifesto, the Christian response to all the destruction and murder that they had heard about. But to their dismay the words above the Archbishop's signature consisted of just two words: *Do nothing.*

In the face of all the provocation and all the urgent pleading of the young men, Ben Kwashi discovered God's answer, his plan: and it was simply to resist any kind of retaliation, to turn away from anything that would fuel further communal violence. And, of course, it was the right way forward; within hours the violence had ended. Those looking for a fight discovered that they had no one to fight with.

It took time, and a lot of prayer on Ben's part, to understand God's will on that day. And the answer had been: *Do nothing.*

My second story you may well know but it was brought home to me again this week as I sorted through the books in the green bookcases in the south aisle. In a small pamphlet I had picked up in a Church somewhere, I read again the story of Maximilian Kolbe, the Franciscan monk, imprisoned in Auschwitz.

Some of you will have been to that terrible place and stood among the huts and the public squares where so many lost their lives as part of the Holocaust. And you may know the story of how, when prisoners were being selected to starve to death after a few had escaped from the camp, Maximilian Kolbe offered to take the place of a young father who had been selected at random and who had cried out in agony, for his wife and young family.

On that grey square, under such terrible psychological pressure, with pain and suffering in the minds of all those around him, Kolbe had no time to think. His taking the place of another prisoner was instinctive and it was immediate. He had no chance to think: *if someone else is chosen I will take their place*. He just acted from the heart.

And in that split-second Kolbe gave us a wonderful example of God's providence. He knew that God's care involved giving away his life - and what he wanted - for that which was better still. As a result of his free choice, he expressed for all time and in the most practical of ways just how much God loves and cares for us all.

What Kwashi took hours to do, Kolbe did in a nano-second. But their decisions all came from the same loving heart: in their different situations they had learnt how to convert violence and hate into peace, using what God had taught them: to bring the world back to how it was at the very beginning when all creation could sing out: *and behold it is very good*.

Providence is not about God controlling us and restricting our freedom as some might want to tell us: we are not puppets. Providence is what happens when we learn to ignore what seems most obvious; when we learn to trust God absolutely and in so doing, learn to break free of what seems natural so that we can be his instruments, his partners in transforming the world.

And the great thing is that when we do that we are not alone. I have told you about Ben Kwashi and about Maximilian Kolbe. Today's reading from Hebrews gives us a much longer list – Barak, Gideon, Rahab and Samson – men and women who were willing to allow themselves to be part of God's providence in their day – each prepared to suffer for what they knew to be right.

The choice really is ours and Jesus makes that as stark as he can: *Do you choose me and my ways – even if that means giving up the people you value most: mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters?*

It might not seem much of a break but this is the deal. Providence: God plans in action through our willingness to trust him. Come what may.