

SERMON FOR TRINITY 3 | 25.06.23

Jeremiah 20: 7-13; Romans 6; 16-21; St Matthew 10: 24-39

It's there among the fridge magnets from far and wide: the little motto "I used to be indecisive; now I'm not so sure..."

Having read, and re-read today's readings, looking for inspiration yesterday morning, I was sitting among the picture hoardings in Packington Square in the afternoon at the launch of a new book about the redevelopment of the estate over the last ten years: 'Packington Works'.

And as I sat, I got talking to someone who, today, is setting off on a three-week cycling tour of Mongolia. Nearby another lady was sounding off to all who would hear, about how she felt the modern development had torn apart the community she grew up in. I got home to hear the news about the Wagner tanks turning back on the road to Moscow and to receive a phone call from the organ builder about how to fix the blower in time for the evening concert. And then I spent an hour in the glorious sunshine and read another chapter of Michael Arditti's book 'The Choice' that has so gripped me this week, a present from Sinead for Father's Day.

And I went back to the readings and wondered: what relevance do these passages of the Bible have in any of those situations? Would they still have an impact on a mountain bike in Mongolia, in and around the social upheaval in Packington Square or even among the tank crews in Russia?

And the answer, strangely, is 'yes they do'. What we are doing, right now is not some kind of weird withdrawal from the real world into the unreal landscape of the Bible. What these readings are doing is to hold a magnifying glass to all that we are about and to encourage us to look more deeply into the questions that face us. And to take us beyond the motto on that fridge magnet: "I used to be indecisive; now I'm not so sure..."

Because much of it is a parallel with the questions raised in 'Packington Works'. Why do people think as they do? What has so enraged them, so hurt them, so inspired them, that they hold the views that fill this little book?

Jeremiah is at a cross roads. He has tried his best to share what God had given him to say in his local community and his neighbours have turned on him and ridiculed his faith. What do I do, he says. Do I carry on and continue to get laughed at, at best, or ignored and shunned at worst? Can I cope with the name calling and the endless put downs? Wouldn't it be just easier if I just conformed, gave up my faith and acted like they do? Can I cope with being hated?

But the he finds that he can't just go along with the crowd. Something within him refuses to allow him to just give in and he is in, as the passage says, a state of real mental anguish. He is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't...

We have all been there: those big days in our lives when we have had to make what can seem like impossible choices, when whatever we choose to do is going to hurt – either ourselves or someone we love, days when giving up on God seems to be easier and the most sensible thing to do. It is all very well for Jesus to say: *Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.* From where we are standing, we may well feel very frightened – and very rejected. Just like Jeremiah.

The thousands who became known as the Windrush generation, those who left the Caribbean for the UK in 1948 - 75 years ago – have been in the spotlight recently with commemorations in Southwark Cathedral and throughout the country, including a reception with the King. Proper attention has been given to those whose records were destroyed and who were deported when they got older and more ill and the place of the African-American community is being celebrated.

But how long has it taken to reach this point? As the late Rose Baker from Montserrat was wont to remind us, when she was searching for accommodation in those years, how often she came across that famous window notice: no Irish, no Blacks, no dogs. With Jeremiah how often did they call out: *O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous, you see into our hearts and minds. Let them see your love for your servants.*

If we are looking for relevance you can't get more basic than that. The lady bemoaning the end of the old Packington is not talking architecture as such: what she is talking about is the way nobody seemed to care that friends and family wanted to stay together; they weren't simply social units they were flesh and blood for whom 'being together' mattered more than anything else.

So why does Jesus say: *Do not think I have come to bring peace: I have not come to bring peace but a sword where a man will be set against his father, a daughter against her mother...* Is he really serious when he says that these things don't matter because what is more important is that we leave these things behind because God is more important? Is it any wonder that we feel like Jeremiah: perhaps we ought just to take the easy way out?

Or does he really mean that this life is a real test of who we are and what we are about? That there is a choice to be made between caving into selfishness and sin and striving as best we can to hold onto the grace that God is freely giving to withstand the knocks and the difficulties.

Clarissa, the woman priest in Michael Arditti's book 'The Choice' has a teenage son Xan who endlessly voices the alternative to the 'love your neighbour as yourself' principle. Endlessly cynical and intolerant, Xan deals with all the crises in the book with a shrug of the shoulders and a quip that no good God would ever allow all these bad things to happen. It is a very

powerful read and I warmly commend it.

But it cannot be the final answer. So I want to end with two quotes - the first the final words of a Dominican monk with the extraordinarily apt name of Fr Rene Beaupere, (Fr 'Goodfather')! He had spent his life caring for people from across the religious divide and this is what he wrote at the time of his death:

Now that I am on the other side of the veil, I will tell you a secret: I've lived a man's life and - like all of you - I've known moments of hesitation about the road to follow. You know as well as I do that we sometimes find ourselves at the crossroads where the future, at first glance, appear contradictory. I want to tell you that it has been your love and your trust in God through prayer that has helped me to keep to as straight a path as possible, with the added joy of discovering beyond the crossroads - sometimes years later - that the differences and the tribal loyalties weren't in conflict at all.

So continue to move forward quietly, hand in hand, without worrying too much about the turmoils of the 'world'. Love one another. Remain in communion with each other. And don't forget: 'God is bigger than our hearts'."

Being decisive as a Christian is not about the choices we make, but about the way we take everything we face back to the Lord in our prayer. Only with his grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit will the answers come:

In the words of Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith:
*In Christ alone we learn to care,
to lay aside the sword;
so in his name lets make our prayer:
your Kingdom come, O Lord.*

I used to be indecisive, but now I now how to be sure...