

Sunday 13th February 2022

Psalm 1

Jeremiah 17: 5-8

Have faith despite the odds

If Geoff Gleed were here this morning, he would certainly tell the story far better than me, but like me, those who have known him for many years may recall that, at a time he joined the Police Force (for those who don't know, he served for several years as a Wiltshire 'copper') he was affectionately known as "the Bishop" - we'll take his word on it that it was an "affectionate" nickname - that's what he's written here!

Why "The Bishop"? well to begin with it soon became known that he was an organist and so rightly his fellow coppers assumed he was a Christian and often in church. Secondly (and again we only have Geoff's word for it) he says his language was slightly less 'colourful' than many of his colleagues in the force - so he got singled out! "He goes to church, but he's not a bad lad!" "He's a good bit of fun, we quite like him!" - Well that's how Geoff remembers his mates saying.

Well those around during Jeremiah's time DIDN'T think much of HIM. For the people of his day in Judah, Jeremiah was the bringer of bad news....when you get home if you care to take up your Bible and read some of his book in the Old Testament you'll see what I mean.... you'll easily understand why "being a Jeremiah" was nothing more than being a 'moaning minnie' and forever looking on the black side....the eternal pessimist!

In truth though, Jeremiah was quite right in what he was saying.... he could see that his nation was sliding rapidly towards destruction and during his time Judah WAS actually conquered by Babylon in 586 bc and the people forced into exile.

Jeremiah was desperately urging the people to turn from the lives they were living and back to life with God at the centre. But of course the people did not want to know.

They much preferred to strive for wealth, prestige and power - looking for financial security to enjoy the fruits of their labours and thus be admired as successfulall perfectly understandable of course, and I guess if we're honest we can easily identify with the people of Jeremiah's time - after all people haven't changed in 2½ thousand years.

Clearly poor old Jeremiah could be classed as a miserable failure as a doom-monger and prophet because after 40 years of serving as God's spokesman to Judah, No-one really heeded what he was saying - no-one listened !

BUT.... and here's the rub, like so much of Jesus's life and ministry Jeremiah WAS seen as successful by God and by the people of Judah in later generations. Like many other great figures in the Bible, Jeremiah faithfully proclaimed the word of God. He was obedient against all the odds.

So the central message I want us to take on board this morning is that as followers in the way, we have to be truthful and honest, ready to proclaim our faith and belief without fear or reluctance or embarrassment.

Now it won't make us the most popular person in the room, but then popularity should be our primary aim. Our purpose, our goal is to speak the truth as we perceive the truth to be through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We need first and foremost to put our trust in God - like Jeremiah and the writer of Psalm 1 - both said, "Our delight should be in the law of the Lord"...in other words, through seeking: reading our Bible, through prayer, through talking with travellers along life's faith journey and sharing experiences we have of what our role is in God's great plan. Then as we learn and understand more - just like that tree we heard in the reading - planted by streams of water we shall bring forth good fruit - because our roots are deep and strong and will support us through the challenges that life presents to us (and haven't we all met challenges over the past year or so!)

Faith comes through trust. Faith comes through learning and sharing and asking and in showing and although at times we all feel inadequate for the task, these qualities equip us to journey on with confidence.

Now I know that much of what I've shared is more easily said than done - and its often the case in sermons! We all know that in real life there are those who would mock us seek to make us look small and bring us down.... or worse - simply ignore us! But we are in good company - look back to Jeremiah, and so many others in the Bible. But we don't have to go back as far as Jeremiah and the great characters of the stories we learned as children. Just think of the many Christians who have stood by their faith in recent times - I'm sure you can easily name some....Martin Luther King ("I have a Dream!"_ Trevor Huddleston who with Desmond Tutu worked hard to rid South Africa of its Apartheid policies, back in the 16th century there was Bible translator William Tyndale, the preacher Whitfield in the 17/1800s, abolitionist Wilberforce in the 19th century, not forgetting Frances Willard a Christian suffragette and more recent still Christian Fuhrer - an East German pastor who worked tirelessly at the height of the cold war and helped to bring about the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

Great names all of them - you can look them up and see what they succeeded in doing and then of course there's you and me!! Can you believe it? You know as well as me that life as a Christian goes beyond these doors - out into the rough and tumble world of real life. As an eternal optimist I truly believe that many of those who might mock our faith and see us all as being 'a bit odd' are in fact crying out for reason and purpose in their own lives and may need help.

We have all seem wonderful examples of caring and sharing over the past 2 years, and long may such acts of kindness and sacrifice continue. I believe that those with a deeper-rooted faith in things beyond themselves, will be able to reach out in faith and love regardless of what challenges are dished up.

I could go on but let me end with one thought: one of the greatest barriers to anything we say or do is our lack of belief in our own abilities...too often we lack self-confidence. Well I believe that faith is not only the support mechanism, it's the very foundation on which we can build our lives. Faith will help us grow those deeper and stronger roots to support us in our daily lives.

No, we can't change the world but we can be part of its transformation - a small part, perhaps but nonetheless a part.

An old hymn says "Jesus bids us shine with a pure clear light..." and it ends with " You in your small corner and I in mine"

I bet you're singing it in your head (I well recall learning it from Shelly's grandma when I was in the Beginners' class here at Immanuel many years ago) .

Desmond Tutu put that thought into more sophisticated language:

"Do your little bit of good where you are: it's those little bits of good, when put together, can overwhelm the world"

That seems to be the right place to end a sermon but there is one final thought that Geoff would have me offer....

Again, it comes from Bishop Tutu: " If you want peace, you don't talk with your friends, you talk with your enemies"

Yes it's very easy and understandable to want to be "popular" to want to be a an " OK, nice person" but there are blessings we can receive if we put our trust in God just like the prophets of old, the Christians of Yesterday and also the Christians of today....."Christians of today?" you ask - who are they?

Would you believe it...? That's me and you!

Amen