

Sunday 29th October 2017
Last Sunday after Trinity (A)
Civic Service

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Jeremiah 29.4-14
G: John 3.1-8

Regeneration

The theme of our service this morning is regeneration; a subject close to the heart of our Lord Mayor Councillor Malcom Kennedy who was a Regeneration Officer with the NWDA until 1998 when he was elected to office as Labour Councillor for Kirkdale becoming the opposition spokesperson on Regeneration until in 2010, he became Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Transport a role only relinquished in May on becoming Lord Mayor.

My own professional life has also been one which has involved the business of regeneration from my early days as a Building Surveyor in Liverpool City Architects, regenerating the post war estates of Sparrow Hall and Ackers Hall to my work close by at Princes Dock to my Current role as CEO of the Liverpool BID Company

It is also most appropriate this morning to be here in the Church of our Lady and St Nicholas a Church Building that has witnessed its own regeneration, if we were able this morning to utilise the transport of that great exponent of regeneration Doctor Who we would be able to travel back to 1353 when land was granted to the Mayor and Burgesses of Liverpool on which to build a larger chapel to replace the existing chapel of St. Mary del Quay, known to have been in existence in 1257. In February 1361, new Church of St. Nicholas was dedicated. Until 1699 St. Nicholas was regarded as a chapel of ease to Walton Church. In that year, however, an act was secured to create the new parish of Liverpool. In 1718, it was found necessary to enlarge the church further. In 1775, the church was reported to be in a ruinous state and it was decided to pull down the external walls and the roof, the new church being rebuilt around the old galleries. On 11th February 1810, the spire of the church collapsed bringing down the tower, roof and galleries of the church. 25 people were killed and 24 badly injured. The tower was quickly rebuilt and was completed in early 1815.

The body of St. Nicholas' Church was badly damaged by air raids on 20th December 1940 and was completely destroyed in May 1941. In 1943, a temporary church was built within the ruins and in 1949 work was commenced on the rebuilding of the church. The new building was re-consecrated on 18th October 1952.

Regeneration from Latin regeneratus,

- 1: formed or created again
- 2: spiritually reborn or converted
- 3: restored to a better, higher, or more worthy state

Of course, the situation for our own city could have been so much different if in the 1980's the then PM had heeded the words of her cabin colleague

In documents released to the National Archives, Mr Howe wrote to the prime minister warning her of the “need to be careful not to over-commit scarce resources to Liverpool.”

“We do not want to find ourselves concentrating all the limited cash that may have to be made available into Liverpool and having nothing left for possibly more promising areas such as the West Midlands or, even, the North East,” he added.

“It would be regrettable if some of the brighter ideas for renewing economic activity were to be sown only on relatively stony ground on the banks of the Mersey.”

Geoffrey Howe, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, argued that enough money had been spent on the city and they should not waste their energy “making water flow uphill.”

He made his case at the same time as Michael Heseltine, the Environment Secretary, lobbied the prime minister for a £100m boost for Liverpool following the Toxteth riots in 1981, and planned to make a two week visit to draw up a rescue plan.

It is sometimes difficult as we sit here in 2017 when so much incredible regeneration has happened in the city and as we look forward to the incredible plans to remember those difficult times

This morning's reading from Jeremiah speaks of a similar time to that faced by our own city just 30 years ago, although we hadn't been overthrown by an external invader, for those of us who lived through those times it did sometimes feel if we had been abandoned in a foreign land. Jeremiah was a prophet of the sixth century BC in the kingdom of Judah. Judah had survived for half a millennium, more or less. But in the end, a combination of political miscalculation and other factors meant that the kingdom was overrun, and after a long and horrific siege the city fell.

In two great waves the leaders of the nation – those who had survived – were taken on a death march to Babylon.

Jeremiah had prophesied the defeat because the nation had fallen away from God's standards. Once the exiles were in Babylon they wrote to Jeremiah, asking what they should do now. One of the key parts of his answer is in the first reading this morning

The essence of those verses, and those around them, is writing to the exiles at this moment of the deepest possible blackest despair that we can imagine. His answer was this: you're going to

be there a very long time (that's bad news), settle down and bless the community in which you live.

The circumstances in which you find yourselves are not a cause for despair, but for reflection on the past and a renewal of confidence in the God who is greater than all of history.

And in fact, in due course, virtually uniquely among the people of that area they were brought back from exile.

The people of Judah suffered the consequences of their turning away from God to other gods, of seeking to find alternative values not based in truth – the absolute truth of the revealed God – but in what was convenient and easy.

Chapter 29 contains a promise in verse 11 that is often quoted to give people hope.

What is not so often realised that the fulfilment of the promise lies 70 years in the future!

For this chapter is written from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon. It is an encouragement to make the most of their situation and not simply wait for something to turn up. They must not mortgage the present hoping for things to go back to how they used to be.

How easy it is to miss the blessings that God provides for us by looking for something else. Sometimes it is in the ordinary not the dramatic that we find God's will for us.

Jeremiah tells them not to spend their time fretting, discontented, and lamenting the passing of the "good old days". Instead they have to accept that they were where they were and get on with the business of living. They would be there for the long haul, so roots are needed to sustain life. Homes, gardens, marriage and family life, are all signs of being settled. They were to be the order of the day. More than that there was a call to be model citizens not resenting their exile but adding value to the society in which they were now part. How can this be?

The answer is found firstly in the opening sentence of the letter that is chapter 29 Their exile was not bad luck, not the fault of others but was in the end God's plan for them to refine them for his future purpose.

This nation which was incurably idolatrous would return from exile as the most monotheistic people in the world. They went into exile as a nation and returned as a church.

Throughout the Old Testament, time after time after time, from Genesis to Malachi, these values include justice for the poor, reaching out to the stranger, integrity without partiality in government, and a dedication to the flourishing of the whole community.

Secondly, God is also saying through Jeremiah that even when things go wrong, which in all societies they will from time to time because we are all human,

God is greater than our greatest failures.

We have to seek to do right, but we can trust in the providence and salvation of God for the future.

That is the promise made to the people of Judah, and thus they were to settle down amongst their enemies; to make the best of their situation, to bless the communities in which they lived, and look to the moment of their redemption.

A genuine openness to the common good, and to God's interpretation of that in our hearts, will cause us to look at each other with boundless hope for our future as a society.

So Jeremiah called the exiles to action. "Seek the welfare of the city..."

The Jews of the time of Jeremiah in exile in Babylon, had written asking what they should do? Clearly, they thought, God was going to rescue them for the sake of God's name! Therefore, as in the earliest days of the people of Israel, when still caught up in Egypt, they should be ready to go at a moment's notice. They were in a place that was temporary; they should not allow themselves to get embedded in it.

But no, says Jeremiah, unpredictable as always, do not turn away from the world, but turn towards it; do not moralise, but bless; do not hate, but include. Marry and be given in marriage; plant gardens and fields; pray and prosper.

And so for us here in 2017 what are we to do We are to get involved. We are to get our hands dirty, to speak of the common good, truly interpreted in the light of the scripture, its horizons opened up by the radicality of the gospel, demands from us our own radicality that can only come from the overflowing of the Spirit of God within us.

Within Jeremiah there is that prophecy of hope of a future. Within the words of Jesus, speaking in John, we hear words of regeneration but not of a city Jesus speaks of a personal regeneration, the recreation

"Of being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

in his words, the promise of the gift of the Spirit of God who will make possible the impossible the regeneration of a city not just through bricks and mortar but through personal regeneration, transforming our city being achieved in blessing and loving and serving and transforming the society in which we live.

May our city's regeneration be formed through the recreation that each of us can experience in our own lives

Fr Bill Addy