

**OT: Jeremiah 17.5-10**  
**NT: I Corinthians 15.12-20**  
**Gp: Luke 6.17-26**

It is easy to believe that the world is rapidly going to hell in a hand cart! When far right politicians criticise more liberal countries for a lack of democracy and freedom of speech. When the most powerful and the most rich join together to progress their own selfish agendas at the expense of the most powerless and the most poor. When bullies take it upon themselves to try and determine the fate of a country or peoples who wish to maintain their own identities and freedoms. It is natural to feel despondent and hopeless. And that is before you look at the current parlous state of the Church of England and its misunderstanding of Safeguarding and the need for transparency to protect the most vulnerable.

If life as a hermit or being castaway on a desert island are not options available to you, then turn to today's readings. For there we find hope in abundance, there we remember the beliefs by which we try to live our lives, there we can be rooted and grounded in a love which will forever bring hope.

Starting with Jeremiah, who can be notoriously miserable, not surprising given his life's experiences, we are reminded that those who trust only in themselves and others, who rely on their own strength and not God's:

*shall be like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see when relief comes.*

In other words, they may appear to flourish for a time but there is no true life in them. Their time will be limited and only dust awaits them. While those who put their trust in God, who know their own weakness and limitations:

*They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.*

For us who acknowledge the power of the grace of God, this is the stream in which we are planted, this is the life that enriches ours and will lead us through the harshest of times. This image of life versus dust will be echoed soon in the liturgy of Ash Wednesday when we are marked with ashes in the shape of a cross with the words:

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.  
Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.*

So lesson one from Jeremiah, by opening our lives to God, we live by the love of the Father, the eternal life of the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit. Whatever drought may surround us, we are plants that will not fail.

Turning to Paul and his letter to the Corinthians, that image of fruitfulness and eternal life continues.

*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.*

But Paul tells it in his usual acerbic, no-nonsense self.

*If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

Basically, don't think you can just pay lip service to the gospel, that you can use it to look good or for your own means, to win over others by boasting of your Christianity. No, you have to be fully committed and by believing in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, live a life that totally reflects that belief with all the struggles and hardships that may entail. Accepting that God sees the whole picture and that whatever may happen to us, he will always walk with us.

Believing that we will never be tested beyond our strength because that strength is rooted in God's grace. Realising that true happiness and fulfilment come not from considering only our own needs but by putting others first. In other words obeying the two great commandments:

*you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."*

And:

*"You shall love your neighbour as yourself."*

So lesson two from Paul, if we commit completely to the will of God and live by the resurrection of Christ, we will live fruitful and contented lives, no matter what darkness is present, the light will always prevail. Finally, we have Jesus' own words through the Gospel of Luke, Luke's version of the Beatitudes found in Matthew:

*Blessed are you who are poor,  
for yours is the kingdom of God.  
'Blessed are you who are hungry now,  
for you will be filled.  
'Blessed are you who weep now,  
for you will laugh.*

These words come with healing, are inspired by the sight of so many who flocked to Jesus, not just for physical healing but for the spiritual balm that was missing in their lives. Note that the crowds came first to hear Jesus, to be enfolded in his words. Words spoken with authority and love. Words that could cure the sick and cast out demons because they came directly from the power of God, from the love of God, from the grace of God. Words that brought life, words that would bear fruit in the lives of those who listened, words that provoked a response that could not be denied. And while hope was given to the poor and struggling, Jesus was also quick to remind others of the sentiments expressed by Jeremiah:

*But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.  
'Woe to you who are full now,*

*for you will be hungry.  
'Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.*

So lesson three from Jesus himself, as Christians we are called to live by a code that reverses what this world holds dear. Our riches come in acknowledging our poverty and need for the grace of God. Our contentment comes in believing in a hunger that only God can fulfil. Our joy is complete when we live our lives according to God's will and not our own.

We may live in dark and despairing times, as humanity has so frequently done but let us not forget where our hope and strength lie.

*O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord,  
in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life,  
whose service is perfect freedom;  
defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies;  
that we, surely trusting in thy defence,  
may not fear the power of any adversaries;  
through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

**Revd Michelle Montrose**