

OT: Jeremiah 23:1-6
NT: Colossians 1:11-20
Gp: Luke 23:33-43

Those who know me, know that my 'weekly day off' is usually Friday evening, and if there are no weddings or other services, Saturday morning watching Saturday Kitchen. My family has benefitted well from the recommended wine that I've bought over time! The programme is usually light-hearted but this week's episode made me cry.

One of the guest chefs was Imad Alarnab, a Syrian by birth who had his own restaurant in his home country but who was forced to flee with his family 10 years ago when his home and business were bombed and destroyed by the Assad regime. He arrived in England with nothing. He now has two successful restaurants in London, is grateful for all the support he has received in this country and shares his success with donations to an orphanage back in Syria which cares for children whose parents disappeared in the carnage of the civil war. In all that he has been through, this man exudes a quiet peace born of gratitude and a deep sense of hope that he has never lost. All that Assad built up for himself has gone, while Imad and his family are thriving in peace and contentment.

There are leaders in today's world who might benefit from reading today's passage from Jeremiah. Those who fraternise with others who hold power at the expense of their people, who crave gold and riches with no thought to the poor in their country, those who worship themselves and pay only lip service to God.

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord.

In the depressing state of this world, it would be easy to succumb to despair but today as we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, we are reminded that we have at our side a Saviour who *is the image of the invisible God*, Jesus Christ. He is the supreme example of true power, God's power. Power that is built on love so that the needs of others are paramount, riches that are emptying out yourself so that the grace of God can flood in and worship in adoration and unity where all are gathered into God's kingdom *where sorrow and sighing shall flee away* and all are equal.

This is what we hope for and this hope requires trust. Trust that God sees the whole picture, knows how the story will end. Trust that God will never abandon us, no matter how distant he might seem at times or how far from him we might put ourselves. Trust that all will be well and that a place in heaven is waiting for us when God is ready. Trust that a refugee who has lost everything can build a new life with love and thanksgiving. Trust that a crucified thief can be forgiven his sins, even at the point of death.

Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

This man recognised the innocent man at his side as redeemer and king, understood without understanding that his was a kingdom beyond anything in this world. Knew with certainty that the offer of Paradise was beyond all the gold and riches of this world, was a prize beyond all knowing, given with love and compassion.

Compassion meaning suffering with, sharing deep feelings with. So the Good Thief represents all of us if we choose to honour Jesus as our Lord and King. Jesus who was willing to suffer every human pain, rejection, grief, persecution and even the ignominious, painful death of a criminal on the cross, quite literally excruciating.

It is because Jesus in whom *all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*, it is because as God he was so willing to submerge himself fully into our human condition, it is because as truly God and truly man, Christ is a king without parity, an example for all who find themselves in positions of power and a sign of hope beyond all hope for all who believe. So if we place ourselves in his hands, we are safe, even if by the standards of this world it looks to be so different as it seemed for the Good Thief.

If we acknowledge the Father as Creator of all things, if we trust in the Holy Spirit as our guide, if we worship Jesus as our redeemer and King, then we will live fruitful lives, blessed with love and peace in this world.

*Till in Heav'n we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

Revd Michelle Montrose