

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 20/10/2019

Jeremiah 31:27-34
Psalm 119:97-104
2 Timothy 3:10-4:5
Luke 18:1-14

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Today's readings capture perfectly one of the greatest tensions that we, as those who proclaim the Christian faith, face in our lives. And that is the tension between the reality of the world as we see it now, the life that we live now, and the promise of the world and the life which is to come. And to be perfectly honest, sometimes it is really hard to hold those two things in tension - to continue to be hopeful, as we have been commanded to be, when faced with the present reality as we experience it.

Jeremiah is a prophet whose people knew what it was like to feel hopeless. All they had built had been torn down, and all they had believed in and hoped for had been destroyed, and they continued to live with the consequences, the aftermath, day after day after day. And so it is to them, and to us, that the prophet brings the word of the Lord, "Just as I have watched over you to pluck up and tear down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over you to build and to plant, says the Lord. ... The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah."

Now that is a promise that we could take heart from, but it leaves a lot of questions unanswered, doesn't it? Like the obvious one - when?! It is all very well to promise that "the days are surely coming", but we'd like a bit more detail, wouldn't we? How long have we got to wait? Because it makes a difference doesn't it? It's a bit like not knowing, when you are sick, just how long you are going to be laid up for. You want to know, so you can make plans; put some things off, delegate others.

For a doctor to say in that situation, “The days are surely coming when you will be well again” doesn’t quite deal with the complexities of the situation does it? Well, Jeremiah is not giving us an answer. The people of Jerusalem didn’t, at that time, but their day did come. We aren’t either, and so that day remains a hope for which we watch and pray. And so the next question that naturally arises in such a situation is “What are we to do in the meantime?” What does faithfulness look like while we wait for the promised new day?

Well, the prophet doesn’t really answer that question in the extract we heard today, but I think our other readings give us some good guidelines. Two things stand out for me, and I think they are relevant to our current situation.

The first comes from the gospel reading. The opening line gives a clear indication of not only *what* to do but how important it is likely to be: “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” Clearly this is directed to people who might be in danger of losing heart. And a major contributor to the danger of them losing heart is that what they are hoping for and praying for is not being realised. They have waited and hoped and prayed, but still there is nothing more than “the days are surely coming”. The answer: keep praying, says Jesus.

The parable he tells does not give us any of the answers we might be looking for. It speaks only about what to do in the meantime. Pray always. What’s the point? Well, even if you were trying to get something out of someone who couldn’t care less, persistence and tenacity will usually pay off in the end, so when you are dealing with God who really does want to give you what’s best for you, you have even less reason to give up.

And part of the point here is that God’s desire to give us what is best for us does not always look much like what we want or what we think is best for us. In the Jeremiah reading, God does not shirk responsibility for the plucking up and tearing down, the overthrowing and destroying.

If we need a period of trudging in the wilderness feeling like our prayers and hopes are being withheld in order to prepare us for the entry into the promised land, we're unlikely to recognize it ourselves. But God knows what is in store for us and what it is going to take to prepare us. And the one thing that is made clear is that continuing to pray, regardless of whether it seems to be achieving anything, is a crucial part of what we need.

A second thing, related to this, is found in Paul's guidance for Timothy: "I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable. Always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully." In other words, just get on with it. Ministry may not seem very fruitful in such times. It might seem that whatever we sow is snatched away by the birds and choked by the weeds and scorched by the sun, but that doesn't mean that we should sit back and wait for a more opportune time.

Be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable, says Paul. We are not called to be effective, we are called to be faithful. We sow, and it is up to God whether anything sprouts or not. We are not responsible for what is God's responsibility. That goes for the whole of our situation here, as a church. It is not our job to engineer a recovery project for the church. Our job is to be faithful; to pray always, to continue in what we have learned, studying and teaching the scriptures, and to carry on in the ministries we have been given.

There is more than enough to do in the meantime. When will the day of resurrection and renewal come? Who can know. But in the meantime, be faithful, pray always, continue in learning the scriptures, and carry out your ministry joyfully. For the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will build and plant and make a new covenant with you. And this is the covenant that I will make with you after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within you, and I will write it on your hearts; and I will be your God, and you shall be my people.

No longer will anyone need to teach each other, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for you will all know me, from the least of you to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their failings, and remember your sin no more.”

What wonderful words of comfort and encouragement to us, as we seek, in our own way, to be faithful to our calling.

In the name of God. Amen.