

Unlike the readings we have heard from Jeremiah over the last few weeks – today there is a glimpse of hope! In Jeremiah 31:27 God reminds Jeremiah of his commission by summarizing and reiterating the task that God had set out for him. Now while only 2 of the four verbs focus on the positive, it is clear that building and planting, is as much the job of the prophet as are prophetic warnings. While much of the book of Jeremiah is focused on plucking up, pulling down, destroying, and overthrowing, the focus in this passage (Jeremiah 31:27-34) is on building and planting. In other words, this text focuses on bringing hope to the beleaguered community¹.

This past week Fr Laurence and I, along with about 170 priests, deacons and bishops from the Willesden Area were on a residential conference in Merville in France. It has been Bishop Pete's practice once every 5-7 years to bring all the Priests in his area and his responsibility together for 3 nights and days in a location that is hard for them to escape so that we might all be reminded of what we are commissioned to do (I am not sure whether we would be seen as a beleaguered community?!). Like this message to Jeremiah while there was some conversation about what might need to be pulled down or even reimagined. Most of the focus was on how we continue to build and plant the Kingdom of God in our part of this Great World City. There were many interesting presentations from leading theologians, political scientists and bishops – some reminding us of the need to be visible in our communities, or inspiring us to the type of leadership we collectively as the Church of England need to be offering. In many ways the most helpful learning came from the conversations with others over meals, or the evenings or on our outing to visit the war graves at Tyne Cot. Many of these conversations focused on the things which don't change in our world – the influx of refugees or the poor; and the aspirations of the everyday people we encounter in parishes right across west London.

These were the conversations which for me were most encouraging and the strongest reminder of the building, planting and nurturing which God tasks Jeremiah and us with. The passage we hear from Jeremiah today forms part of three chapters which are often referred to as *Jeremiah's Book of Consolation*. After what seems like an endless barrage of warning and reproach, Jeremiah now turns his pen to words of encouragement for the exiled community. They are hundreds of miles away from home, and the community needed to know that God had not forgotten them. The hope Jeremiah envisioned included not only a physical restoration but a spiritual one as well. This restoration would have been beyond the community's imagining. This would be a healing of the relationship between God and the entire nation.

Over the past week we as the clergy of Willesden spent a lot of time considering this relationship God offers as we talked about how we as the church – all of us – including all of us in this church of St Anne – might be restored physically and

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3023

spiritually in our modern age. What would it take for us to continue to transform London that is spiritually alive, and driven by justice? Like Jeremiah we heard much about the need to offer a vision of hope and prayer. It is impossible as a community to move forward if we have no sense of hope – and God offers us this hope and we find it in prayer.

We talked lots about how we ambassadors too – something that each person in this congregation has committed to – and we reaffirm at every baptism. One of the most interesting lectures during the week was presented by Revd Dr Emma Ineson who is the principal of Trinity College in Bristol and a practical theologian. She spoke about the style of leadership we as priests, but also the church offers within a democratic city like London. She made many interesting points – but the image which has stayed with me related to this notion of offering hope. She talked about the fact that in our baptism we are each called to be Ambassadors for Christ. She said that of course the problem with this is we are ambassadors for a nation which is not realised. We are ambassadors for the Kingdom of God – a vision of a world which is just and Godly here on earth and in heaven. We pray for God's Kingdom to come every day, every week for the whole of our lives. This is what we share about our faith. But we also live with the tension that the fullness of the Kingdom of God is yet to be realised. Not everyone recognises God or does the whole world live by the values of God's kingdom. In a sense we represent as ambassadors a work in progress, and as such it is not fully formed. Now this is both a gift and a challenge. Generally an ambassador represents something or someone who is concrete and understood. As ambassadors for Christ we do not have this luxury.

(It reminded me of the Princess of Oud who is buried in Paddington Cemetery. She and her family came to England because one day Queen Victoria troops claimed Oud in central Indian and did not recognise its existence. Her family came to London to give evidence that they did in fact exist – but it took a long time for them to be recognised – during which time one the Princess died).

So if we are a people like those who heard the prophecy of Jeremiah a people who need encouragement and a vision of hope to continue the journey. If we are a people who know we ambassadors, but we also recognise that we are ambassadors for a kingdom which is not fully recognised. If we are a people who want to be visible, want to have faith, want to grow and learn and enjoy this community – what then do we do – how then do we continue to build this community – how do we grow in faith and prayer – how do we sustain our Christian journey?

I was reminded during the week of a quote from *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*² who wrote *“Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial... It is not we who build. Christ*

² <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/603122-those-who-love-their-dream-of-a-christian-community-more>

builds the church... We must confess he builds. We must proclaim, he builds. We must pray to him, and he will build.

As with Jeremiah, as with so many of the lectures this week, as with many of the questions we ask each day – the answer is found in and through prayer. It is not a magic solution and takes commitment, dedication, and in a sense must be our life's work – for prayer underpins all that we seek to do as individuals and as a community. Prayer will not always bring the solution we want or even solve all our problems. But prayer will sustain us, centre us and focus on who is the source of all things. And this is the point of the parable tells today of the widow and the judge.

I love how Luke introduces this parable - encouraging Jesus' followers to pray always and not lose heart. There are many images in this parable – a Judge who is unjust and fears neither 'God nor man'; there is a woman who is vulnerable – indeed one of the most vulnerable in the society of the time who is not heard. The way that this is laid out within Luke points us to see that if even in a system that is unjust and corrupt a vulnerable woman will eventually be heard³ – how much more so does God hear and see the pain in humanity and within our situation.

While there are times when we question why the world continues to be such a difficult place, and that God may seem like an unjust judge, God's actions are just and God will deliver justice in due time. As we so often focused on over these past weeks – it is not God who is failing to act – rather the evil of humanity will not listen to the leading of God. But we also do know that God does respond and we can look back on our lives and recall times when it has been clear to us that God has heard our cries and responded – even if not in the way that we may have hoped.

Maybe a more helpful reflection for us is not on the judge image in the parable but that of the widow. The widow is the Pursuer of Justice. She not only beseeches the judge, but also persists in her pleas for justice to the point of creating sufficient pressure to influence his actions. No matter how indifferent or unjust the world seems we should never give up in our call to change all that is wrong in the world. We can never give up – for God will bring transformation through our persistent actions. Pray as we know is both our meditation and our actions. Perhaps the sign of our faith will be a willingness to persist in prayer, as we see in this widow who persists against all odds in her fight for justice against the powerful judge⁴.

Jeremiah reminded the people that God would write on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. This is a mark of prayer. It is the mark of the ambassador and it is what each of us is called to be.

Persistent in our word and action for justice.

But most importantly persistent in our daily prayer. Amen

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2966

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1787