

Trinity 3 (Proper 8) 28th June 2020

Jeremiah 28:5-9, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42

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We should not be surprised that all our readings have echoes of contemporary issues - the word of God is timeless - and even though they were of their time, they invite us to reflect on what God is saying to us now.

Jeremiah prophesied about 600 years before Jesus, during an extended crisis when the King, leaders, and many of the people of Judah, had been taken into exile in Babylon, along with their precious temple vessels as trophies of war. We read part of a confrontation between Jeremiah and a false prophet Hananiah, left behind in that temple. Jeremiah took a yoke a symbol of subjugation or slavery to signify the condition of the people, that one day God would break.

They had a historical legacy of slavery and were longing to be freed to return to their temple, their rightful place. While Hananiah claimed exile would last just 2 years, Jeremiah prophesied 70, and more importantly what God required of them was not a 'return to normal' but repentance for the wrongs they had committed, the inequalities and injustices of their society, and a commitment to change.

About 650 years later Paul used the language of slavery in his letter to the Romans, because it would be 'easily understood' in a culture with a legacy of slavery and its duties, obligations and redemption. He assumed they would make a link between this and the freedom won for them on the cross by Jesus. But his message also was about what should govern and shape their lives as a result. It too was about repentance and change.

I am reminded of a conversation I had once with a fellow traveller on a long train journey. He had assumed I was a Christian because I was wearing the early Christian symbol of a fish. As a Muslim, he said, he could not understand why Christians think they do not need to worry about sinning, because we are always being forgiven through the death of Jesus. "That is wrong" he said, "where is your sense of responsibility for how you live your lives now".

I doubt he had read Paul's letter, but I think Paul would have agreed with him. "Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?" he asked. (v15). He had posed virtually the same question at the start of this chapter "What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning, so grace may increase?" He answered - by no means and went on to explain that in baptism we are united with Christ and in our new life in Christ we die to sin and are made righteous, right with God. In this second part of the chapter his argument takes a different focus of our obedience to the one from whom grace flows.

In summary he says do not think you can go on living your lives how you please just because you know that God has freed you from slavery to sin through Jesus. Turning to Christ means a complete change in our way of living. Grace is given not so that we have a means of continuing in our old way, knowing our sins are forgiven, but of transforming us into a new way of living, offering ourselves in complete obedience to God. You should live 'as if every part of your being is given to serve God'.

This is not something that just happens to us - it must be a deliberate and active choice and commitment. We actively turn from sin to God - and it is God's grace that enables us to do it. That sets us free from sin but at the same time it means we no longer have any freedom to sin.

And as Paul goes on to emphasise neither condition, slavery to sin nor slavery to righteousness, is static. The only result from continuing in sin is increasing sinfulness. But slavery to righteousness leads to increasing holiness (v 19-20) - we must go on changing as we seek to become more and more Christlike in our living.

The best example of what it means in practice to live as if every part of our being is given in service to God was the example of Jesus himself. And in the gospel reading he spoke of sending his disciples out as his representatives - to live and work for him, following his example in the world. He spoke of whoever, whenever, and of even the smallest act being an act of welcome for him and the one who sent him.

The Christian gospel is good news, not because it enables us to return to our rightful places in the world, but because we can face up to those things that have marred our living, repent and find forgiveness and then continue our journeys changing more and more into the likeness of Christ.

In recent weeks and months perhaps many of us have felt as if we were in exile, longing to get back to our temple, But in our wider world we cannot ignore the fact that the language and legacies of slavery have emerged again and some serious wrongs have been exposed in our society - inequalities, racism, abuse of power. But also we have been given a gift of time to reflect on these things as well as those things in our own lives that need to change.

We all have our histories - individually and corporately as a church. We belong to a church that was once complicit in slave trading and while we cannot change the past, nor obliterate it by destroying its symbols, we can reflect for the future and commit ourselves to finding ways to help build a better world - one in which Christ's vision of life for all who believe can be made real.

For as Paul wrote in another of his letters "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus". (Galatians 3:28).

In one of his many bulletins recently our Bishop urged us to join him in repentance for past mistakes and for grace to take practical steps to build a church which is truly welcoming to all. He offered this prayer written by Dean Jeffrey John:

Lord, you made us all in your image.

We are all equal because we are equally loved by you.

Forgive us our complicity in the racism which disfigures our common life.

Forgive our failure to recognise the mechanisms of prejudice in our society because we are so used to them and profit from them.

Forgive us the wealth or status we enjoy because others have been systematically excluded or downgraded.

Lord teach us to give to each other the value you give to us all.

Help us mean it when we pray 'Your kingdom come' by building a world of genuinely equal opportunity, equal acceptance, and equal justice. We ask it for your love's sake,

Amen.