

30 August 2020 Twelfth Sunday after Trinity *A sermon written by Viv*

Readings Jeremiah 15.15-21, Romans 12.9-21, Matthew 16.21-28

Our readings this morning are all about 'reward' – forgiveness or retribution, vengeance or rehabilitation.

Jeremiah is not the jolliest of prophets!! In today's passage we hear that he was cross with God; 'Why have you given me pain unceasing, uncurable wounds? Remember me, visit me – bring down retribution for me on my persecutors.' God's response is clear. 'If you change, then I will grant your request. If you stop talking rubbish! (what is worthless) and start saying things that are precious, then I will eventually make your enemies turn to you, I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked'.

So it's clear from the start that what happens to our enemies is God's business, not ours, and that how God acts often depends on our own actions.

This is continued in our Gospel passage. When Jesus explained what was about to happen to him, Peter was quick (as usual) to jump to the wrong response. 'No – this mustn't happen!' Peter would have defended Jesus to the last. But, once again, it wasn't up to him. We must never interfere with the carrying out of God's will for somebody else. Many people throughout the ages have chosen to take up their cross in the name of Jesus Christ and suffered for it, and that is their prerogative. And it's not up to any of us to 'repay' others if they do us or anyone else evil. In the end, our Father in heaven will repay everyone for what they have done. If it has been good, they will be repaid with glory, if evil, then things won't be so comfortable.

And Paul takes this up in his Epistle to the Romans. He is adamant that to live a life totally in Christ requires us to live only according to that which is good. It doesn't matter what other people do to us, or to anyone else, we must never give in to the temptation to repay evil with evil.

This can feel very difficult at times, especially when we see terrible evil carried out on other people. But we are not bidden to condone evil actions. Of course we must condemn them, and do what we can to change them, but Paul tells us that one of the most important things is that we must bless the people who are doing the evil. Not in order to condone what they are doing, but in attempt to change their hearts and minds. And I'm sure that many of us have seen how this can work. If someone is unkind, says awful things, then they often don't know what to do if you respond with kindness. By repaying evil with good it can feel as if burning coals have been heaped on their heads.

This doesn't mean that anyone ever gets away with evil, but 'repayment' is up to God. (I believe he can work through a country's just penal system, but this would take a separate sermon to discuss.) We ourselves are commanded to live peaceably, blessing those who do evil. We have to leave room for God to be angry – and, of course, we can never know fully the mind and heart of anyone who has committed evil. This is known by God alone, who will therefore repay accordingly.

Well, we can probably all accept this, sitting peacefully here in church listening to me preach, or at home, reading these words. But it's not so easy to remain 'peaceful' if we turn on the News, or read the paper (if we haven't given this up completely because it's so depressing) and we are reminded of the chaos around us. We are reminded that we are living in a time of a heightened 'blame game'!

In the same newspaper there will be articles blaming the government for the whole Coronavirus crisis as well as articles blaming the scientists for it... or the Chinese, or the Russians. The exam boards are of course responsible for the fiasco over A level, GCSE, BTECH results – or, actually, is it the teachers' fault for over-estimating grades, or underestimating them – or again – is it the governments' fault because they hadn't worked out a contingency fool-proof plan for this sort of crisis. And what about the terrible economic situation? That must be the government's fault – or is this also the scientists fault because they didn't tell us the truth about the virus, or rather they told us a great many 'truths' – many contradicting each other? or perhaps it's Public Health England or the World Health Organisation ..

or

Well - we could go on all day trying to find someone or something to blame for everything that happens to us.

Even without coronavirus, this has become one of the features of modern society. We like to think everything bad that happens is someone else's fault. We want someone to blame, and deep down, to punish, and pay for our problems. A bit like Jeremiah when you come to think about it!!

So perhaps we've come full-circle.

God told Jeremiah to stop talking rubbish, to stop just moaning about everything. So perhaps this is a message for our own day and age. We must try not to give in to the temptation to complain and moan about everything that's happening. Of course we need to be realistic about things, and we need to speak out against evil, something that Jeremiah actually devoted his life to doing. But we also need to try to be positive about things, to say things that are useful – 'precious' - rather than worthless. We need to look at some of the good things that have come out of this crisis, to see where people have responded in the way they felt was the best for everyone, and to see where things can be made better.

And - we are bidden by God above all things to love one another. And this isn't just the people we like, but everyone, even those we find most frustrating and even evil. We need to trust in God – that he will 'repay' in his way of justice and truth.

If we can live in Christ, loving one another, striving to bringing hope and glory, rather than despair and unrest, then we change the world around us. No one explains what it is to live truly in Christ better than Paul -

'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in enthusiasm, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be proud, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'

AMEN