

Looking outwards

A sermon preached by Prof Revd Rob Gilbert on Sunday 14 August 2016 - Trinity 12 at St Peter's Wolvercote. Refs: Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12: 49-56.

Like many people, I am sometimes given to looking inwards, to being introspective. And this can be a source of worry. It can make us worry maybe more than we should about things we do wrong, losing perspective on our actions. It can seem to cut us off from other people. It can make us worry in ways that are just not very helpful as we prioritise a single-person point of view, our point of view. Human lives are finite, they begin and they end, and focusing too much on my own outlook on the world can be a source of terror.

Today's readings are a summons to look outwards and not inwards, to see what's happening around us, to see what we are part of, and to gain strength, comfort and a clear sense of direction from that. I think having a clear sense of direction comes with following Jesus in the way that he calls us to; taking up your cross requires a clear sense of direction, even if it's just following the person in front.

I would also argue that wealthy societies increasingly prioritise private experience, personal thoughts, and the individual perspective. Of course such things matter, but do they matter most? Because I guess we matter most to each other – it's the people we love who matter most – and when we're focused on the good of another person the great thing is we lay aside worries about our own wellbeing for the joy of being with them or because of the concern we have for them. We do not think about ourselves when we are with our friends. Again, when we're focused on the sheer enjoyment of a particular activity whether it's making music, or playing a game, or sharing a meal, or doing an experiment, we are not thinking about ourselves. A mother is most a parent when she is absorbed in the care of her children. A scientist is most a researcher when she is absorbed in her experiment or analysing her data. In the terms used by one thinker I admire, I think we are most human when we are being *porous*, when we have soft edges or edges with gaps in them, when we are *reaching out* and *sharing* and *receiving*: not *protecting* and *hiding* and *defining* ourselves. The term used as the opposite of porous is *buffered* – modern people are more *buffered* from each other, they want space around themselves; five hundred years ago, let alone two thousand years ago, life was much more porous, more open, more communal, more about each other.

That said, even Jesus in his own day wanted the people he met to be more porous, less buffered. He wants us to look outwards, not inwards. Two weeks ago we heard the parable of the rich man who hides his wealth in his barns - a stark teaching that it is tragic to keep the things you have, and to keep yourself apart from other people. You'll remember the man who planned to store everything safely died that same night. What a waste, to hoard the things he had when he could have given them away. Today's Gospel reading follows in the same chapter of Luke, we should see it in the same light. Jesus is saying: Get outside your own heads! Look what's happening around you – there is trouble brewing, there is a crisis coming! Then he gives his homely example about the weather: you can see a storm coming, you can see a heatwave coming, but you do not know how to read the present time. Look outwards and see the signs of the times.

But the concerns being raised are older than Jesus too. The prophet Jeremiah is warning against introspection as well – he says *false* prophets cry out "I have dreamed! I have dreamed" – dreams are private things; whereas true prophecy is the word of God and it looks outwards not inwards. It sees what straw has in common with wheat. It sees that God's word is effective and powerful and not a matter of dreams and imaginings.

This theme that we should look outwards not inwards is also the overarching tone of our wonderful reading from Hebrews – so evocative, a roll call of salvation and of the power of faith to be, like God's word, effective and powerful and not a matter of dreams and imaginings.

The Hebrews reading says to us, in effect, Remember! Remember where your faith comes from and who has been faithful and how! And from this gain strength to run the race that is set before you, following in the steps of Jesus. How are we told Jesus achieved what he did? The answer is: out of joy – out of the power you receive when you give yourself over to another person in friendship, or in conversation; out of the power you receive when you allow yourself to be given over to the making of music or the reading of a book, the

playing of a game, or the watching of a movie. These are little things we do, every day I hope, though they make all the difference in life; and they reflect the joy of someone who looks outwards and onwards, and not inwards and backwards. This is what Jesus did, he looked outwards and onwards, outwards with joy and onwards with hope. He wants us to do the same.

So today's readings ask us to get outside our own heads, and they remind us of the joy to be found if we can manage to do that. They also ask us to look beyond our normal horizons, and remember how other people, whether it's Rahab the prostitute or any of the other great cloud of witnesses, have been empowered or inspired by their ability to look outwards and not inwards. And to remember Rahab or David or any of the other examples mentioned is not, I think, to look backwards, but to remember *now* – make present in our own minds, now – something from the past, and take it with us into the future. When we remember the past, I think you could say the difference between looking inwards and backwards and looking outwards and onwards is the difference between nostalgia and gratitude.

So, if that is something our readings today mean, that there is a call on us to look outwards, what should we do in response? Well, there's the question! The letter to the Hebrews reminds us of the faith we have received, and Jesus asks us to look outwards and take that faith with us into the future. In our world, today, there is a lot to take in – we will pray about some of the things that worry us most in a few moments. The job of Christians is to try and work out the best things we can do in response, both as individual human beings and as groups of people, by looking outwards with love and with concern. Amen.