

Like a deceitful brook

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on 3 September 2017, the 12th Sunday after Trinity
Refs: Jeremiah 15.15-21; Romans 12.9-end; Matthew 16.21-end

“Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.” Angry words – shockingly angry - addressed to God by Jeremiah the prophet.

A prophet’s role is always difficult. Recently I read an article about Al Gore, the man who only just missed becoming American President in the year 2000. Since then he has been an ardent campaigner on the subject of climate change with his Oscar winning film “An Inconvenient Truth”, and its recent sequel “An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power”. Gore’s work is widely appreciated but, although he was joint winner of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, he has been subjected to a high level of personal abuse from the American right wing. One commentator called him the “most sanctimonious lardbutt yank on the planet”. And there has been much worse than that.

Of course there are many people playing a prophetic role in less privileged parts of the world who endure a lot more than verbal abuse. Notoriously the role of prophet is a dangerous and difficult calling. As Al Gore put it: *“I’m hardly the first messenger to be attacked by those who don’t like the message. In the history of reform movements, the technique of demonizing a visible messenger is a tried and tested strategy.”*

Jesus warns us of something similar in our gospel reading today. Following Jesus, living for the Kingdom of God and its values will be a costly calling: *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”*

Challenging but also very realistic words about the cost of following Jesus and living his way - in a world that is resistant to his values and the Kingdom of God.

Again this is nothing new. Jesus was acutely aware how the Old Testament prophets were opposed and persecuted for bringing God’s message to a people who didn’t want to hear it. Jeremiah is a good example. He lived in difficult times when the kingdom of Judah was under attack from the powerful Babylonian Empire. His message was to accept what is happening and not to fight it. What happens to us is a consequence of our own actions, our own failure to live God’s way. Now is not the time to fight. Accept the inevitable, be penitent and put your trust in God for a better future.

This was not a popular message which also seemed unpatriotic. The other prophets, the priests, the king and his court all tried to shut him up. Jeremiah felt pretty fed up and angry with God. He hadn’t chosen this calling, and he didn’t like what was happening to him as a result of it. He says to God – this is not fair. I’ve followed your calling and done what you’ve asked and now look what’s happening to me. Couldn’t you at least protect me and look after me a bit?

Jeremiah was not a hero. He was a very honest man and in the passages known as “Jeremiah’s confessions” he doesn’t hold back. He says how it feels. He says how let down and angry he feels and he’s not afraid to express his anger to God, as we hear in our reading: *“Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.”*

I think Jeremiah was right to be honest with God and how he felt, right not to cover up his angry feelings and right to say to God exactly as he was feeling.

Do you think it's right to express our anger to God? Or should we do what we normally do, and only give the best bits of ourselves to God, and use only our most polite and reverent language when we speak to God?

I believe Jeremiah was right – for the following reasons.

First, it's better to be angry with God than to take out our anger on others. St Paul's epistle warns us not to take out our anger on other people, not to avenge ourselves on those who have hurt us, but to entrust our anger to God. How much better to be angry with God, and kind to others, rather than the other way round.

Second, if we feel anger deep down, it's good to express it, to let it out. Repressed anger is a common cause of depression. If we squash down our anger, it can leave us emotionally flat and lifeless, or worse still, silently resentful. Prayer can be a safe place to let out our anger because no one gets hurt.

And that's the third reason - because God can take it. In my Parkinson's exercise class in the summer, one of our exercises was to put on boxing gloves and punch a large bag. Like all these exercises, we were encouraged to do it with as much vigour and energy as we could. It's a very good arm exercise, but it does feel a bit strange! One of the other participants said to me, "I wouldn't like to meet you on a dark night – who are you thinking of?" I'm glad to say I couldn't think of anyone I would want to punch like that. But I had the strangest thought that if I had to punch someone, the only person I could punch like that would be God – because God could take it and wouldn't mind!

That leads to my fourth reason. Jeremiah can only express his anger to God because he has a strong and secure relationship with God. It is because he actually trusts God very deeply, and is very secure in his relationship with God, that he knows it is safe to be angry with God, and he's not afraid to be honest with God. His willingness to express his anger with God so freely and so forcefully is actually a mark of how very close he is to God.

God's reply to Jeremiah is honest too. No easy answers, no escape from his calling, but some reassurance: *"I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the LORD."*

Back in the summer, at our village Festival Service, when we thought about stories, myths and legends, I included some passages about Aslan the lion, the Christ figure in C S Lewis's Narnia stories. One passage I didn't include was the less known story of Shasta in *The Horse and his Boy*. Shasta has been brought up in the oppressive southern kingdom of Calormen, and most of the book is about his escape to the free land of Narnia in the north. There is a very moving passage when he meets Aslan for the first time. After many frightening adventures, including some very scary encounters with wild lions, Shasta is feeling very sorry for himself. Aslan is just a voice and a dim shape in the mist at this stage. Shasta says "Oh I am the unluckiest person in the whole world!"

Then he feels a warm breath, and the voice says: "Tell me your sorrows."

Shasta tells him his whole life story and how awful it has all been.

Aslan replies, "I do not call you unfortunate."

"Don't you think it was bad luck to meet so many lions?" questions Shasta.

"There was only one lion," said the voice. "I was the lion who forced you to join with the one who became your friend. I was the cat who comforted you in the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept."

As he goes on, Shasta realizes that where he had thought things had been going wrong all the time, Aslan was guiding him, keeping him from danger and leading him to his goal.

The episode is clearly based on the story of the road to Emmaus, where the disciples find a stranger walking with them and they express to this stranger their disappointment and disillusionment and, maybe, their anger. Jesus responds, not with cosy reassurances, but rather by opening their eyes to see it all differently, to see the pattern, to see how God was at work even in the midst of everything seeming to go wrong.

So I would say – like Shasta, like Jeremiah, like those disciples on the road to Emmaus – be honest with God, don't be afraid in your prayer to tell God how it feels, hold nothing back. Maybe, like Shasta, like Jeremiah, like those disciples on the road, you may just find that in some way God responds to you. You may start to see afresh how God is at work in our lives, guiding us on our way, protecting us from following wrong paths, leading us in the right direction, and always there beside us.

Amen