

## **TRINITY 3 SERMON: 25TH JUNE 2023 AT WINTERBOURNE STOKE (based on Jer. 20:7-13, Romans 6:1b - 11, & Matt.10:24-39)**

Living in faith and fear.

Authority and fear - two words that sum up much of the content of today's readings. But whose authority? How do we respond to fear? Where does faith fit into the often harsh reality of life?

Jeremiah's 40 year prophetic ministry around 600 BC brought him up against his fellow Israelites, who refused to believe their nation was in danger from the Babylonian empire. His was a reluctant ministry, made worse by the threats he received from his fellow countrymen, who did not want to hear him spreading messages of doom and gloom. Jeremiah has discovered that faithful living isn't easy, so he has a go at God, reproaching him for making him endure a life of constant fear. But, just like many an argument that starts with recriminations, it ends in an expression of faith and confidence in God's authority. Basically, Jeremiah had to get his pent up fear and frustration off his chest. Even the strongest relationships have rocky patches, yet remain firm, made perhaps even stronger through the ability to speak openly and honestly. In our relationship with God, our voices count too.

Then, as now, people were expected to conform and play by society's rules. On the whole, that is no bad thing, but when it's fear that ensures conformity, differing views are stifled and those who seek to question are censured unfairly. And it was no different in first century Palestine. Jesus dared to question, to encourage a different way of looking at the rules. As a result, he was labelled a troublemaker, by both the Jewish community and the Roman authorities. He drew unwelcome attention to himself, and ultimately to all who followed him. The fear felt by Jesus' followers, on a collision course with the powers of this world, risked bringing about the failure of discipleship. At that time, followers of Christ were likely to be viewed as anything from crackpots to subversives, challenging the rules, undermining authority, threatening the very fabric of society. Jesus makes no bones about the trials ahead, forcing his disciples to confront that knowledge as a first step in overcoming their fear. He came, he said, not "to bring peace, but a sword". The very act of peacemaking generates violence, much as Jeremiah had experienced.

However, the reading is not just a warning about the dangers of discipleship - it also contains comfort and consolation. Jesus understood how much their community mattered to the disciples, and how hard it was going to be, both to step away and to try and change it. It is their faith in Jesus, and their relationship through him with God, that will get them through. The allusion to sparrows wonderfully describes God's love for us. Sparrows are numerous and, at a casual glance, without many distinguishing features. They are so easy to overlook as our gaze seeks out more interesting species. That apparent lack of worth, that insignificance does not however make them any less important to God. Such birds would have fetched just pennies at the market in those days, but God does not overlook them - "not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father". The imagery assures the disciples of their worth in a society that will ultimately come to regard them as worthless.

This new way of life, the way of the cross, would bring social rejection and humiliation. Rome crucified those who threatened its control over society, so taking up the cross in the context of first century Palestine meant identifying with those who undermined the authority of the Roman Empire. But what are we, today, to make of these words: "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it". One possible interpretation, in the context of Jesus' teaching, is that life is not to be lived selfishly. That may well mean losing one way of life in order to live differently. Maintaining a low profile by following the expectations of society, not rocking the boat, is one way of living. But if that means keeping our beliefs to ourselves for fear of rebuke or worse, then our lives may be lost to God. Living in faith will not always be easy. We are lucky that in our country, expression of our faith does not normally attract abuse - it is possible both to conform to the expectations of society and be true to our beliefs. But we know it is not the same everywhere, and today's readings may help us to confront our complacency and remember those who suffer for their faith.

Paul's letter to the Romans aimed at boosting the confidence of Christians who found themselves vulnerable to the pressures of life. Today's passage begins with a rhetorical question: "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?". It's a response to the view that God's grace is freely given, and in proportion to the sin, however great. So why should we make any effort to stop doing wrong, if as believers we are to be forgiven anyway? Clearly that is not what our baptism and faith mean. Christ's dying to sin was a once for all time event that enables us to be reconciled with God and

to look forward ultimately to life with him. Meanwhile, back on earth, we, through our baptism, have been given the chance to “walk in newness of life”. That word walk suggests actively living in faith, in the way of the cross as Jesus put it. We are no longer slaves to sin, unless we choose to be, and we reveal our choice through how we live and act.

Fear, along with other emotions like anger, are part of the human condition. Jeremiah got his angry feelings off his chest by railing at God, and having let off steam reasserted his faith in God. Jesus forced the disciples to confront the reality of their mission, while at the same time dispelling any doubts about the path they had chosen. Paul sought to remind his readers that their baptism had freed them from the bondage of sin. Humankind has an uneasy relationship with authority of any kind, and Christians are caught between earthly authority and that of God. Today’s readings suggest that the most enduring relationship, the one that matters above all else, is the one we have with God. Knowing and believing that will help us with any problems we may have with authority on earth. And, in answer to my question at the start, that is precisely where faith fits into the often harsh reality of life.

In the name of Christ, amen.