

Sunday 2 June 2024, 1st Sunday after Trinity, Choral Matins

Jeremiah 5.1-19

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‘These acts be signs of a second Josiah, who reformed the church of God in his days. You are to reward virtue, to revenge sin, to justify the innocent, to relieve the poor, to procure peace, to repress violence, and to execute justice throughout your realms. For precedents, on those kings who performed not these things, the old law shews how the Lord revenged his quarrel; and on those kings who fulfilled these things, he poured forth his blessings in abundance.’

Those of you familiar with the English Reformation will know that reign of King Edward VI was likened to that of a second Josiah. As Archbishop Cranmer put it in his coronation address just quoted, the king of England and the good king of the Old Testament kingdom of Judah were to enact the same reforms and receive from God the same blessings. Likewise, failure to maintain true religion and virtue would undoubtedly receive from God the same punishments as visited the kingdom under its earlier faithless kings. In the sixteenth century- and after- the history God’s ancient people in the bible served as an analogue of the Christian kingdoms of Europe. Good kings were those who served God, promoted virtue, and punished vice. Wicked kings abandoned doing good, persecuted the poor, and elevated the proud and scornful to positions of power. The outcomes of these actions were, on the one hand, prosperity and peace and, on the other, degradation and disintegration and, not uncommonly, foreign rule. The use of scripture to cast a particular political agenda as ‘godly’ was commonplace.

England’s political self-understanding, and the Whig history-writing that accompanied it in the following centuries, was grounded on this mode of biblical interpretation. British colonising experiments took such ‘bible-based’ politics to the far-flung shores of the Americas where the Puritan concept of the shining ‘city on a hill’ remains a significant undercurrent in United States (and therefore world) politics to this day. Presidents Kennedy, Reagan, Obama, and Trump have all variously utilised this imagery to drive forward their particular vision of political life. Good ‘kings’ ruling as God would have them do are not relics of the past.

Yet many of us might be wary of drawing too close an analogy between the bible and society, between the good and wicked kings of the Old Testament and today’s global political system. How often is God’s name invoked to support a direction of policy which seems, to many a faithful Christian, to be utterly opposed to the teaching of Christ himself and the kingdom his apostles proclaimed? Where two or three are gathered together in my name... there will be disagreement. The easy way out of this dilemma is to build a wall between scripture and politics. So we retain some few basic principles of charity and abstracted virtue and we allow that followers of other religions and philosophies can own these too, and so build together a society of lowest common denominator beliefs, or as we have come to call them: ‘British values’. And our great, inclusive society rumbles on reasonably happily.

But does it? I want to ask a question which might make you uncomfortable. Is it possible to retain and maintain values and behaviours in a society if these values and behaviours have been removed from the philosophical context in which they appeared and which have

historically sustained them? Or more simply put: can people be expected to behave if they do not believe? If there is not agreement on what is right- and more importantly why it is right- can we legitimately continue to expect agreed moral behaviour? Are 'British values' enough without 'British beliefs' to bolster them? Can Christian morality continue to exist without Christian faith?

This is not a question I particularly like asking, not least because I think I know how it can be heard by those with an allergy to religious fundamentalism. But it is a question that lies at the root of what the prophet Jeremiah is saying in our first lesson, and therefore it is worth considering. *Run ye to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see... if there be any that executeth judgment, that seeketh the truth; and I will pardon it. And though they say, The Lord liveth; surely they swear falsely.* They claim to believe, says Jeremiah, but they are liars and the consequence of their lies can be seen in their behaviour. *Their transgressions are many, and their backslidings are increased... Thy children have forsaken me, and sworn by them that are no gods... They were as fed horses in the morning: every one neighed after his neighbour's wife.* Their behaviour, says the prophet, shows their true values and makes a mockery of their claim to faith. Can people be expected to behave if they do not believe?

I will get me unto the great men, and will speak unto them; for they have known the way of the Lord, and the judgment of their God: but these have altogether broken the yoke, and burst the bonds. Not only does the prophet find the common people unbelieving, he finds those who lead them to be no better. And he prophesies that God will punish them for their abandonment of him and his ways. Their faithlessness will be the cause of their downfall and another nation 'whose language thou knowest not' will rule over them. *They shall eat up thine harvest, and thy bread, which thy sons and thy daughters should eat: they shall eat up thy flocks and thine herds: they shall eat up thy vines and thy fig trees: they shall impoverish thy fenced cities, wherein thou trustedst, with the sword.*

With passages like this in mind, is it any wonder that Archbishop Cranmer went to such great lengths to impress upon young king Edward the necessity of true faith and obedience to God? 'You are to reward virtue, to revenge sin, to justify the innocent, to relieve the poor, to procure peace, to repress violence, and to execute justice throughout your realms. For precedents, on those kings who performed not these things, the old law shews how the Lord revenged his quarrel.' We know what happens when rulers and kingdoms forsake the true God; we have seen it before, time and time again. Virtue cannot survive without faith, religion cannot flourish without belief, values cannot be sustained beyond the ground that nourishes them.

A general election approaches. How are we to respond in our context to the words of Jeremiah? In closing let me suggest three things:

First, examine your own faith and test its ground. This is most important thing. Are you rooted in Jesus Christ the only Son of God who died for your sins and rose again? Do you believe you will give account to him of your actions in this life? If your faith is wavering, ask him who gives without hesitation and say, 'Lord increase my faith.'

Second, pray for the King, that he may always firmly believe and trust in God and his Son Jesus Christ, and so act. And pray too for his majesty's government and all who are to be put in authority under him, that they may, as our Prayer Book says, truly and indifferently minister justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and the maintenance of true religion and virtue.

Finally, pray for this nation, for your families, friends, and neighbours, that all who abide in the true faith may have their belief confirmed and their actions guided by the Holy Spirit so that they live according to their profession. And pray also for those who do not believe in Jesus, that they may *come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all.* And what they come to believe, pray that they will show forth in their lives, for their good, for the good of others, and for the good of the kingdom in which we all live. Amen.