

Trinity 22: 27 October 2024
2 Kings 22; Colossians 3.12-17
The Dean of Wakefield

Mother Emma, thank you for your invitation to preach. I bring warm greetings to you and all at St Mary's from Wakefield Cathedral. It is good to be here, and to be able once again to worship with Father Tim who was such a good colleague at the cathedral. As Father Tim will know, it is Wakefield Cathedral's proud boast to have the tallest spire in Yorkshire, so I was amused to learn that St Mary Abbots has the tallest spire in London; amused, that is, until I also learned that yours is ten metres taller than ours....

If you have read Mother Emma's weekly message on your website, you will have known before you arrived that today is Bible Sunday – a day to give thanks for God's word as revealed in scripture. I hope that my sermon this morning will be helpful in showing how scripture is able to inform our understanding of the past as well as being a guide to navigating our present and our future under God.

From our first reading: *The king commanded, 'Go, inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found'.*

The services of Matins and Evensong emerged into the, as yet uncertain, light of the English Reformation in Thomas Cranmer's first English Prayer Book of 1549. They took much the same form - though slightly shorter - that we know them in today. In his preface to the new offices of Matins and Evensong Cranmer had described them as *not newly devised by us, but rather (old orders) delivered by the (Church) Fathers which we have restored, as far as we*

could, to (their) ancient and primitive use and excellence. Two years before the publication of Cranmer's Prayer Book a nine-year-old Edward VI, with an impeccably Protestant education, had succeeded his father, Henry VIII. Reformed politicians, courtiers and, crucially, theologians were now firmly in the ascendant in England. Edward was feted as the new Josiah, a king who had come to the throne of Judah in 640 BC at a similar age and under whom a religious reformation had also come to pass, as we have heard this morning in our Old Testament reading. No less a figure than John Calvin saw the parallel. In a letter to Edward VI he wrote, *We see that in the time of good king Josiah, who had the especial testimony of the Holy Spirit, that he had performed every duty of an excellent prince, in faith, zeal, and all holiness. (This) ought to be a great motive to animate and encourage you.* Even Cranmer's assertion, which I quoted just now, that his new services were more properly to be thought of as a restoration of what had been lost has an echo of the discovery of the Book of the Law by the High Priest Hilkiah in the Jerusalem Temple - probably the biblical book we know as Deuteronomy. For Hilkiah and Cranmer the rediscovery of what had been lost represented nothing less than the triumph of an ancient God-given orthodoxy over a latter-day idolatry. How fortunate they both were, they must have thought, to serve monarchs *who (both) did what was right in the sight of the Lord.*

But as the psalmist advises, *(Put) not your trust in princes, nor in any child of man: for there is no help in them.* Scarcely a generation after the death of good King Josiah the Babylonian empire had overwhelmed the tiny Kingdom of Judah and the Jerusalem Temple had been destroyed, just as the prophetess Huldah had foreseen in today's reading, in which she describes what she takes to be an act of delayed divine retribution; and only four years

after the publication of the first English Prayer Book King Edward, the new Josiah, was dead. His demise ushered in a period of terrible and bloody religious turmoil under his half-sister Mary – turmoil that was to continue, one way or another and with peaks and troughs, for nearly one hundred and fifty years. Another piece of Old Testament wisdom comes to mind: *The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established.*

As we move further into this present era, sometimes referred to as late modernity, the human mind continues to devise many plans, but it is increasingly difficult to discern what is the purpose of the Lord. The human mind plans death and destruction across the Middle East, in Ukraine, in Sudan – we know that the grim Cook's Tour of inhumanity has many calling points. There is a prevailing feeling of anxiety and distrust as we become increasingly uncertain of our place in a society where knowledge and ideas have become fragmented. The privatisation of spaces that were once common to all adds to a general sense of alienation.

But there is really no reason for us to assume that these feelings are unique to our times, even if the actual circumstances around us are different. There never *has* been a time when human society has been entirely certain of itself, as we can infer from the reigns of Josiah in the ancient Kingdom of Judah and Edward in Tudor England. For Christians, in particular, this should not be a surprise. After all, as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, *here we have no abiding city, but we look for the city that is to come.* Yet as we look towards that future and eternal city, we cannot slough off responsibility for the city – literal or figurative – in which we currently find ourselves. Instead, and taking scripture as our inspiration, we must learn to cultivate the

qualities of which Paul writes in today's second reading: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience; our behaviour as Christians matching up with our identity in Christ who is the embodiment of all these qualities. It is in cultivating compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience that we also learn to cultivate the qualities of forbearance and forgiveness which enable peace to flourish in our hearts, peace that is then released into the lifeblood of the wider society we are called to serve.

None of this is easy; much of this is counter-cultural; all of this is costly. But being attentive to the counsel and encouragement to be found in our second reading, we may find ourselves beginning to understand how the many plans of our human minds can begin to align with the purposes of the Lord, and so bring us closer to the city that is to come. Let us pray:

*God, stir the soil,
Run the ploughshare deep,
Cut the furrows round and round,
Overturn the hard, dry ground,
Spare no strength, nor toil,
Even though I weep.
In the loose, fresh mangled earth
Sow new seed.
Free of withered vine and weed
Bring fair flowers to birth.*