

Trinity 9, Parish Eucharist. 17th August 2025

Jeremiah 23: 23-29, Hebrews 11: 29-12.2 and Luke 12: 49-56

Mother Emma

Peace and conflict are words we hear on the lips of peoples and leaders all across the world, as we wait in hope and in anxiety for the outcome of peace and ceasefire discussions concerning Ukraine and Gaza, and other parts of the world torn apart by human violence and war.

On Friday, the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we marked the 80th Anniversary of VJ Day, the ending of the Second World War, with a two-minute silence at 12 noon across the country. Jeremy and I were walking on Friday in the North Downs, and we were glad to see that all the train departure boards were reminding people of the silence to be observed, to honour those who had died in the defence of their country and to remember that we should never take for granted the peace we have enjoyed as a result over the past eighty years. At noon, we found ourselves in a small, isolated country church in the middle of fields and woods. The church itself was closed, but the porch, which contained the war memorial board, was open, and during the two minutes, we read through in silence the names of all those who had died in that small community, often three or four with the same surname, remembering the tragedy and grief of war, giving thanks for the courage and sacrifice of those who fought, and praying for God's kingdom of peace and justice to come throughout the world.

As we all hope and pray earnestly for wars to cease, the words of today's Gospel reading, in which Jesus says to his disciples, "*Do you think I bring peace to the world? No, I tell you, but rather division*", jar uncomfortably with the more Christmassy or Victorian images we cling to of the Prince of Peace. We should be clear, however, that Jesus is not saying that his mission is to bring division *per se*, but it is a warning that the message and the call he brings are so powerful and all-consuming that they will divide those willing to accept the call to follow him from those who do not, even members of the same family, household or community. His call to the disciples is urgent and the traumas they will face are imminent – hence his ironic challenge to the crowds that people are better at talking about and interpreting the weather than the signs of the times around them.

Not long after this, he begins to lament the fall of Jerusalem, which will happen only a few decades after his death, as well as alluding to his own death at the hands of the authorities. The message is that the disciples cannot sit back and be "people-pleasers" – their message of repentance, of conversion of life, and of following God in Christ is too important for that. There will be many who will disbelieve their story (and we remember that Jesus is talking here about what they must do once he has died and risen again); many who think they would do better to keep quiet about it rather than antagonize the Roman occupiers; and many from their own families who will be hurt and resentful about their change in priorities.

Such divisions do still arise today; we hear stories even within our own congregation from those who come from countries where to profess Christian faith can lead to violence and separation even from those close to you. Sharing Christian faith does involve talking about hope and comfort, love and compassion. It also means talking about sin and repentance, about living a life rooted in the teachings of Scripture and in honouring every human being as made in the image of God. God's Word speaks out against greed and power which results in the suffering of others or the dishonouring of God's will, as Jesus himself and John the Baptist did, even at great personal cost.

In our first reading, God rails against false prophets who tell everyone what nice dreams they have received of the future, rather than actually sharing God's word faithfully. The Lord condemns: *Those who prophesy lies and ... the deceit of their own heart.* As Jesus accuses the people of talking about the weather instead of the urgent need for turning to God, so the Lord himself tells Jeremiah the platitudes that the false prophets are spouting are more like straw than the real wheat of God's own Word, a Word which like a hammer can break rock to pieces.

The Words of God we encounter in the Bible or through the teaching of Christ are life-changing. They speak repeatedly against greed and the abuse of power, for example in the words of the prophet Amos, *"buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals"*. They speak of the cost of discipleship and of true faith, and we heard in our reading from Hebrews of all those who suffered and yet overcame through faith. Building a world which reflects God's kingdom of peace and justice requires not only ardent prayer, but also a commitment to speak up for the needy and the oppressed, for those who have lost everything at the hands of those who hold the reins of power. Jesus tells us that he does not come to bring the kind of peace which turns away from the suffering of others and speaks of dreams, but the kind of peace in which all people made in the image of God are cherished, cared for and drawn into his worship through repentance and faith even if this is costly for all who preach and share it.

As we commit ourselves this Sunday, as every day, to following Christ, we remember those whose stories may be found in the Scriptures and throughout the history of the church, and we hear the words of the writer to the Hebrews:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.