

## **‘The Word of God – like a fire and a hammer’ – A Homily for Trinity IX**

*Jeremiah 23.23-29; Hebrews 11.29 - 12.2; Luke 12.49-56*

The Church of England has certainly been having fun recently in Cathedrals up and down the country. A giant helter-skelter at Norwich, encouraging people to think deeply about the medieval ceiling as they shoot downwards into the nave; a crazy golf course set up at Rochester, so people can reflect upon the bridges that need to be built in their lives as they aim for a hole in one, and a padded moon-floor at Lichfield to encourage people to look to the stars. All of this with the Archbishop of Canterbury’s statement ringing in our ears: ‘if you can’t have fun in a cathedral, do you really know what fun is?’

It’s probably fair to say that our readings today really are no fun at all. The prophet Jeremiah attacks his colleagues for domesticating God and speaking words of easy comfort. God is not near to you, thunders Jeremiah, he is as far away as the heavens, and his words are not words of comfort and affirmation, but are like a burning fire and a hammer blow to the head. Ouch.

Our New Testament passage starts off a little more promisingly, with the writer starting his awesome ode to the ancient people of faith found in our Hebrew Scriptures. Perhaps the life of faith is one giant party? Oh dear, hang on a minute, ‘some were tortured.. suffering mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment... were stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword... destitute, persecuted, tormented.’ Well, that doesn’t sound like fun at all.

Surely our Gospel will set things right, as we all know that Jesus loved a good party didn’t he? Oh, not today obviously. ‘I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!’ No peace, but division: family against family, brother

against sister, mother against daughter.

Our readings today are no fun at all, because they forcibly remind us of an uncomfortable truth that we most often would like to forget: that our world is out of balance, that the fun and comfort of the few is made possible by the suffering and exclusion of others. Jesus' outrageous statement that he has not come to bring peace but division, only makes sense when we come to consider what the so-called peace Jesus' world was built on. This was nothing but the *Pax Romana*, the peace of Rome, the peace of Empire, offered only to those who accept its rule. Those who didn't were dumped outside the city walls, denied human dignity, and caused to suffer the worst kind of violence, the shameful death of crucifixion. This kind of peace is political compromise in the face of military might and tyrannical rule, and, in the end it is no peace at all, silencing the outcast and the protester, and finally silencing any authentic human voice at all. I'm not even sure we need to look too far in our world to see such a kind of mechanism at work: protests over China extending its influence in Hong Kong and fears of illegal extradition, Trump calling on Congresswomen of colour to go back to the 'broken and crime infested places from which they came,' aspirations of empire from our own country that seek to exclude those who are different. Peace based on enforced silence is finally no peace at all.

Jeremiah's words are no less shocking to us: we want to think that God draws near to us, readily available and at our beck and call, but Jeremiah here speaks against the easy availability of God in much of our religious thinking. God isn't simply a God who is on our side, but rather a God who summons us to be on his side, the side of the orphan and the widow, the marginalised and the destitute. God cannot easily be conscripted to our agendas and isn't there to affirm us in what we already know, or think we know, but rather speaks with a voice from far off, a voice

that questions and judges, provokes and prods. Why are you settling for such easy words, says Jeremiah, when being truly human demands so much more? How often do we settle for such thin accounts of who we are, how often do we fail to do the hard work of wrestling out the depth of what really matters?

Today Laura leaves us to embark on the next stage of her vocational journey. At the end of September she will join the Community of the Resurrection in Mirfield as an ordinand. I'm sure she's going to have a lot of fun along the way, but although the experience will most likely feel like a helter-skelter ride at times, fun is not its primary purpose. At Mirfield, Laura will deepen her life of prayer, kneeling alongside others in her community, speaking words and staying silent, risking herself to the transforming movement of the Holy Spirit. She will also begin a course of deep theological study, not so much to learn more stuff, but rather to have her life challenged, questioned and deepened by Scripture, to come under its gaze, to hear its gift and provocation. At times such prayer and such listening to Scripture will be painful and stretching, radically questioning easy thoughts of herself, God and God's world. And it is this stretching and shaking-up that will be God's most profound work in her life.

Each Sunday we come to Church to pray and to listen to Scripture. Neither are fun activities as they call to the deepest parts of ourselves. They ask us to wake up to truths we are slow to see, to hear voices we are loath to take notice of, to see the difficult reality that is before us rather than to settle for a comforting fantasy. They ask us to let go of small, comforting images of who we are, what our world is like and who we think God is, and to allow the truth of ourselves, our world and our God to explode open in front of us in all its glory and power. Dare we embrace the difficulty and answer the call?