

‘Words of Contradiction and Challenge’ – A homily for Trinity XIII

Jeremiah 15.15-21

Romans 12.9-end

Matthew 16.21-end

In each of our Scriptural readings today we hear words of contradiction and challenge. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of his obedience to receive God’s word as a ‘joy and delight of my heart,’ only to see it dissolve into the taste of bitterness as he is brought into conflict with his peers and in which God is seen as nothing less than ‘a deceitful brook,’ like waters that promise refreshment only to become as dry as a desert in his mouth. In Romans, the Apostle Paul argues that violence and persecution are to be met with blessing and peace, not so much to bring reconciliation and understanding, but rather to leave room for ‘the wrath of God,’ that our acts of kindness may be to others like ‘a heaping of burning coals upon their heads.’ And in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that the path he must walk is one of suffering and death, rather than comfort and triumph, and that the truly authentic self can only emerge through its own denial.

All the best spiritual writers of the Christian tradition understand this deep contradiction that lies at the heart of what it means to be human, the paradox that refuses to unknot itself, the conflict inherent in all real discipleship. Augustine in his psychologically penetrating and spiritually profound *Confessions* poetically writes of the self’s predicament before God: ‘Late have I loved you / beauty so ancient / so new... / You were within, inside me / and I was outside / and I – misshapen – chased after / the beautiful shapes You had made.’ In this catastrophic and climactic passage, Augustine writes about how the human self is so often exiled from itself and that our distance from God is nothing more than our distance from ourselves. He writes about how we constantly get lost in the beautiful things ‘out there’ that God has made, instead of allowing them to form an interior sense of wonder and praise. He speaks of God being both ‘ancient and

new,' a harbour to rest in and yet an explosive to knock us off course. And a little later he will write about the a surprising peace, one that shatters deafness and interrupts blindness. Rowan Williams also echoes this understanding of contradiction and paradox in his writings on Christian prayer, saying that the absence we feel in prayer is not God's absence from us, but our absence from ourselves.

Words of contradiction and challenge. It takes courage to hear such words and courage to speak them. It also takes courage to not just turn away from them, but to face their hardness and their importance in our lives, to allow them to break into our very selves and transform us from the inside out. We can only hear such words when we are made vulnerable. This was why Pope Francis' words in his *Urbi et orbi* (to the city and to the world) address on the steps of St Peter's this Easter were so powerful. Instead of speaking words of bland assurance from the boring domesticity of his own kitchen, he spoke with courage about the pandemic as a 'thick darkness gathering over our squares, our streets and our cities... filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void.' But refusing an easy comfort, he took the time to throw light on 'the false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities... how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish and strengthen our lives and our communities.' For Pope Francis, the very structures and practices we have used to protect and preserve our individual and communal lives have left us weak and unable to act just at such a time that demands such action from us. At the very moment the Church of England's spirit broke and it gave up its rights to the public square, the Roman Pontiff spoke with clarity and vision.

Words of contradiction and challenge. In our Old Testament reading Jeremiah speaks about sweet words that confront and provoke. Time and again the prophets use this unsettling image to speak of God's word, of sweetness and bitterness. We know this word brings us life because it is the active and creative word that calls the world into being and the people towards blessing. But this word can be bitter and demanding too as it calls us

away from small understandings of ourselves and of our God. Can we dare to ask with the prophet: what kind of words am I allowing myself to hear, what kind of words might I have the courage to speak, both to myself, my neighbour and my world?

In Paul we read about loving the stranger, rather than fearing or demonising them. Do we see the face of a young child escaping the turbulent waters of the Channel as he disembarks a tiny dinghy, or do we only see an invasion of foreigners hellbent on destroying our cherished way of life? He writes about blessing the persecutor and loving so passionately and contrarily that such love is a constant irritant and annoyance to others. Can we dare to ask with the apostle about the kind of relationships I am forming, the judgements I am making, the love I am sharing?

And in Matthew we hear that the way to life is that of suffering love, that we must lose everything in order to find the thing of ultimate value, that the denial and death of the diminished and deluded self that we have painfully constructed all these years finally has to go in order for the real us to emerge. Can we dare to ask with Jesus, how can death itself be a doorway to life, how might I turn to the truth of myself by turning away from the delusions and illusions I have constructed?

Words of contradiction and challenge. These are the words of life. But do we have the courage or the vulnerability to hear them?