

Sunday 30 August – Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Liz Barnes

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

In the name of the living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

Jeremiah had a problem coping with God. The prophet had many enemies, and he wondered why God didn't deal urgently with them, stop them in their tracks, and take vengeance upon them. Here he was, an innocent man, God's faithful servant, but God wasn't sticking up for him, protecting him, or meeting his deepest needs. He claimed that he had 'listened to every word' God had spoken to him, and told God, 'Your words filled my heart with joy and happiness.' He had taken his prophetic vocation seriously and could not imagine why things had gone so horribly wrong. He therefore peppered God with indignant questions: 'why do I keep on suffering? Why are my wounds incurable? Why won't they heal? And so on. Jeremiah was beginning to suspect that after all his years of faithful service, God was letting him down, leaving him in the lurch.

All this may seem surprising as Jeremiah was a thoughtful and introspective person and yet this man of God, this servant of God, began to wonder whether God could be trusted, could-be relied upon. In a religious person, and Jeremiah was deeply religious, this was a radical and disturbing doubt. His faith was being tested to the limits, as ours too can be from time to time. He was tempted to fall into despair and unbelief. He challenged God with the question: 'Do you intend to disappoint me like a stream that goes dry in the summer?' This was Jeremiah's cry of dereliction, paralleled by the cry of Jesus on the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

God gave the prophet a pretty rough answer. "If instead of talking nonsense," said God. 'you proclaim a worthwhile message, you will be my prophet again.' God was hinting that Jeremiah had temporarily ceased to be his prophet.

Just as Jeremiah rebuked God, so Peter rebuked Jesus. Jesus had said openly that he would suffer much at the hands of his enemies and be put to death. Peter was horrified to think that such a fate could possibly befall his Master and indignantly rejected the idea.

Peter, like Jeremiah got a pretty rough answer when he challenged Jesus. 'Get away from me Satan!' he cried. Poor Peter! He was only concerned with his Master's welfare, only trying to protect him from harm; yet Jesus had called him Satan (an adversary) for his pains. Peter must have felt deeply hurt. He couldn't make out why Jesus should indulge in such grim prophecies. As we reflect on this, we are reminded of some words in John's Gospel, where Jesus tells Peter: 'What I am doing, you don't understand now, but you will understand later.'

To make matters worse, Jesus went on to say that his disciples must follow the same difficult path he was treading, must be prepared to lose their lives for his sake, must deny themselves and take up their cross. And this seemingly negative way would prove to be positive in the end, the way to eternal life. No wonder Peter was baffled too.

Paul also had a problem coping with God, coping with Christ. He had fiercely opposed the followers of Jesus because he believed that Jesus was a heretic. Then Jesus met him on the Damascus Road and began the process of reconciliation to God and transformation by Christ. Jesus challenged Paul's assumptions, undermined his self-righteousness, changed his mind, and redirected his life. In the passage from Romans Paul painted the portrait of a Christian, of what every Christian ought to be. The keynote of Christian life is love. This love issues in a life devoted to God's service and includes the service of others. The Christian life, according to Paul, is a life of hope and joy; a life of patient endurance in times of troubles; a life of prayer; a life of generosity to our fellow-Christians, and of hospitality to strangers. Jeremiah asked God to bring down retribution on his persecutors; but Paul, touched by the Spirit of Jesus, said the opposite: 'Ask God to bless those who persecute you, to bless, not to curse.' He went on to say we should sympathise with other people, laughing with the joyful, weeping with the sorrowful; that we should show genuine concern for everyone; and that we should take an honest view of ourselves, admitting our imperfections. Wherever possible we should be on good terms with other people, and should seek to overcome evil with good, as Jesus did.

Indeed, the whole of Chapter 12 of Paul's letter to the Romans is beautiful in its pragmatic simplicity. There are the hallmarks of the life to which we have been called. There are the hallmarks of a Christian community that is being renewed by the transformation of minds and refuses to be

conformed to the present age and whilst the list isn't complete by any means there are some beautiful ministries outlined: Speaking God's word into a church community; meeting the needs of people as they arise; teaching and interpreting the word of God to others; encouraging others; sharing possessions with those in need; advocating on behalf of those who have no voice; meeting the needs of the poor.

And Paul sums all that up a beautiful and simple phrase "Let love be sincere." That is it – that is the sum total of the Gospel life. "Let love be sincere." That is our calling as Christians.

I won't pretend that this is an easy challenge, far from it, and it may well seem beyond the scope of most of us: a tall order, a recipe for sainthood. Yet we've all known people who displayed this Christlike character in their daily lives, who possessed these Christlike qualities, and we thank God for them.

With the help of God may we all seek to follow their good examples.

Amen