

## Year A Proper 22

Jeremiah 15: 15-21

Romans 12: 9-21

Matthew 16: 21-28

In our world, we have to accept that all humans are not perfect; that from time to time we do things that we know are not really the right thing to do or say, but we do it anyway. We let ourselves down, and from time to time we also let down our friends and our families. And it can hurt us when we realise we have let someone one down, especially if that person means a lot to us. Most of the time it is little things; we focus on ourselves, not on others, we get absorbed in something and we don't consider other people. Luckily, most of our friends and family cut us some slack and are not too upset by our failings, and I hope we also show the same consideration of others. What we may call 'grace'. Being forgiven for something we have not done, or something we should not have done.

And when you have been sorely tested and irritated by someone's behaviour, I wonder what your 'go to' words of annoyance are? Don't worry I am not asking you to reflect and tell me what you may find yourself instinctively saying. But I will wager you another 2 weeks holiday that you would not say, 'You are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail'?

This was Jeremiah's response to God as Jeremiah lamented that God had not treated his prophet well. Jeremiah was upset because he had been abused by the people he was prophesying to. But, in addition, he was upset because he believed God had not been good to him either. Jeremiah wanted all sorts of bad things to happen to the people who had abused him. I wonder how uncomfortable you felt when you heard Jeremiah exhorting God to bring down retribution on his persecutors? And how does God respond? In v 19 God tells Jeremiah that he must continue to work faithfully, to repent – to change his attitude and heart to those who have abused him – and to refocus his ministry of prophecy, his ministry of declaring God's mission for the people. In offering himself once more in ministry Jeremiah will have a close relationship with God. God is big enough to hear Jeremiah's words of lament, his complaints, and I believe God is happy that Jeremiah can be truthful with God, and lay his complaints before God. God knows that this outpouring is a necessary part of Jeremiah's journey as a prophet. God's wisdom direct Jeremiah to move on

from his complaint, to focus on his prophetic ministry. Remaining in the place of complaint and despair is not good for Jeremiah, or for the people he has been called to serve. God, is, I believe, thankful that Jeremiah is so worked up by the lack of response by the people to his prophesy. It shows Jeremiah deeply cares. Jeremiah is alive with his faith and despite a momentary dip he is not indifferent to the community he serves. If Jeremiah did not care and love the community he served he would not have got so upset with their responses to him. And God responded to Jeremiah; not by offering him a comfy retirement, but by reminding him what his part is in God's mission, and encouraging him to carry on.

In our gospel reading we have the marvellous encounter between Peter and Jesus. Peter had just been commissioned as the rock upon which the church would be built, but barely any time passes before Peter put his foot in it. And who can blame him? Peter was expecting Jesus, the Messiah, to transform his known world; to lead a peaceable nation where the people would flourish, where suffering would be over, and it would continue to the end of times. Peter reacted strongly to Jesus telling the disciples that he would suffer and be killed. That was not what Peter expected to happen. And so, quite naturally, he did his best to argue with Jesus and find another way; to meet Peter's expectations of a 'happy ever after' story. It is clear that Peter didn't hear or perhaps didn't understand the last few words of what Jesus said, 'and on the third day be raised.' And I am sure, in the same situation, we would also have taken the same line as Peter. We may have taken an equally strong line, confidently believing we know the will of God, mixed up with our love for Jesus. None of us would have wanted to just let Jesus suffer and die without some dialogue. Who of us would have said, 'ok, that's fine then, if you go'?

Peter, like us, is trying to tempt Jesus to follow our human will, not God's will. And so, on this first of four teachings by Jesus to the disciples as they turn and face Jerusalem about his suffering, death and resurrection, it is not surprising that Peter reacted as he did. In his teachings Jesus then describes what happens in the world of imperfect humans. Those who become disciples will come up against their own personal temptations and challenges and battling those can be hard. Disciples, living in the real world, will also rub up against human systems, rub up against people without ethics, people hungry for power, people who do not want to operate in the light and dislike light being shone in to dark places. In all sorts of ways, speaking truth can be uncomfortable, personally costly, and for some downright dangerous. However, disciples are also people who have received the blessing of God, who

live rich and full lives, but are not guaranteed to necessarily live an easy life or to live to get a telegram from the Queen.

I know someone who works on one of the Greek islands, supporting refugees from Syria and Afghanistan. He deeply cares for these forgotten people, hidden away from our conscious gaze, forgotten by the media. The work he does, with the limited resources he has, is incredible. His accommodation is hardly better than the refugees he supports. His health has suffered, and his ministry is not always appreciated by the local police and authorities. He has had run ins and threats and been abused. In this person I get a real sense of what Jesus was saying about discipleship. This person is so alive in what they do, but have forfeited the sort of comfy safe lives the rest of us live.

Somewhere on that continuum of discipleship we must find our place, and make our choices as to how we live our lives. We are all called in different ways, to support God's mission, and to discern how best to live that life of mission.

The reading from Romans chapter 12 is one of my favourites. Paul has spent the previous 11 chapters exploring God's grace for Jew and Gentile alike. In chapter 12 he starts to explore what our lives should look like when we live fully in God's grace. He describes this for us both as individuals and as a community of faith. I was tempted to preach just on one or two of the exhortations in this passage, but my post-holiday head wasn't quite up to the task! Maybe it would make a good house group discussion over several weeks?

This passage recognises all the human frailties and imperfections we have; those things we recognise in ourselves and can be too critical of ourselves; those things we recognise but give ourselves too much slack for, and those things we don't recognise about ourselves and which takes a good friend, in the spirit of friendship and love to gently point out to us.

This passage also speaks to us as a faith community. People within a faith community are often expected to live by far far higher standards than other people; and unfairly judged when they don't stick to them, or show that they are as complex a person as their neighbour. I like to think we all try our best to live as Jesus' life modelled for us, but we mess up from time to time. Within a faith community we accept each other, we know we all need God's grace, and the grace of those with whom we share our faith. As a faith community this passage guides us as to how we should interact with others, whether they have a faith or not. As a faith community we are living in the world and are of the world, and hold those two aspects in tension.

This passage does challenge us to consider the questions:

- How does being part of a Christian faith community impact on my life?
- What do others see in who I am and what I do that demonstrates the love of God and God's grace and mercy?

This isn't an invitation to be a 'holier than thou' annoying neighbour, but it is an invitation to reflect on the passage from Romans and prayerfully consider how you may wish to respond to it.

It is also an invitation to reflect on this passage and see if its very practical behaviours and underpinning ethics help you in exploring what it means to be a Christian, and how it may help you be confident in discussing your faith with others.

The three readings today all speak to us of God's love for us in a less than perfect world; of the temptations we face and challenges we can experience as we do whatever we feel able to do to further God's mission, of the nature of disappointment when people refuse to listen to God's word but balanced by the wonder of God's encouragement to continue, of God's purposes being worked out in unexpected ways, and of how we are guided to live a Christian life individually and in community.

Romans 12: 9-21 could almost become a charter for Christians – a bit like the ten commandments. And it can apply to the oldest and youngest amongst us. As we seek to live a faithful life, I commend Paul's words to us all. And at times when we don't get it right, know that we are loved by God, and his grace and mercy endures. I thank God for that!