

## **Sermon for Pentecost 10 St James: 'Words and how to tame them'**

***Neville Suttle 15/8/22***

Two days ago, we had a disturbing reminder from the USA of the power of words, written and spoken in the name of God. Paradoxically, words of or about God, author of all life, probably led a believer in those words to try to take a life, the life of Salman Rushdie. Our bible, like the Quoran, is very unforgiving in places. Our OT reading this morning (Jer 23 v 23-29), like most of the chapter, is a vitriolic condemnation of false prophets, men who, according to Jeremiah, followed their own whims and instincts rather than those of God. A false prophet was anyone who disagreed with Jeremiah and there were a lot of them about! This was a serious matter for Jeremiah, who thought and felt that God was speaking through him: so to disagree with Jeremiah was to disagree with God.

It can truthfully be said Jeremiah got some Big Calls right. He recognized a good and just king when he saw one: if he thought the current incumbent was rotten, he said so and was arrested twice for his trouble! He predicted the fall of Israel into the hands of the Babylonians. He predicted the destruction of Jerusalem and lived to see both events happen. However, his biggest call and most significant prophecy he did not see happen. Earlier in the chapter (v5), we read

“The days are coming”, declares the Lord “when I will raise up to David, a righteous branch, a king who will reign wisely”. (NIV)

Over 200,000 days pass before a man appears and speaks equally divisive words in similar dire circumstances to those used by Jeremiah. That man was Jesus, who either saw himself or was seen by Luke as the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy > 600 years previously. The opening words of our Gospel (Lk 12 v 49-56), as with Jeremiah, continue the tough talking of the whole chapter. In verses we have skipped over, Jesus had told a parable about a servant being left with the responsibility for managing his master's estate. The master unexpectedly returns and finds his agent neglecting his duties: he gets beaten up by his master and in a punchline (sic), Jesus then says 'Of those who have been given much, more will be expected'.

Jesus' words were meant to be unsettling. When Peter heard them, having left home and family to follow Jesus, he asked if Jesus was speaking to him or others. Peter, those here last week might recall, was a member of a 'little flock' who, Jesus also said, was being given the Father's kingdom, no less. That gift was beginning to sound like a millstone round the neck.

How seriously should we take such words, spoken in God's name long, long ago today? Was there really a time when God spoke directly to key figures like

Jeremiah? Did God stop speaking to us once His Son Jesus had said all that needed to be said? The church has long-used such passages to sustain the view that , in the OT, true prophets spoke for God and, in the NT, His words were spoken by his Son. Well they would, wouldn't they, since the church holds herself to be a repository and custodian of the absolute truth about God. The Quran gives divine authority to the words of Mohammed and we have tragically seen where that can lead a total believer.

The pacifist and philosopher Bertrand Russell had no time for religion or God. He dealt with facts and their rational interpretation and looked with contempt on theology. To him, anything said about God was no more than more than a set of opinions and not worth fighting over. In the whirlpool of life for Jesus and his itinerant flock, no one was taking shorthand notes. The words we have read from Luke these last two Sundays might be a paraphrase of stories that Luke had gleaned from the grapevine of the sort of things Jesus said and did? Alternatively, Luke's relationship, with God, like that of Jeremiah and Jesus, may have been so intimate that he and they all spoke with divine authority.

Jesus words in today's gospel were, like Jeremiah's, fire sweeping through the dead litter of the religious past. A radical shift was again needed if the Jewish nation were to escape from another exile, this time in a land, supposedly theirs by biblical decree. The reality at the time was that a ruthless invader, with the help of local trustees, was stealing the land and its resources from the poor. People had to choose: go with the sickly flow or change the system.

Time is not only a great healer but a great revealer. Now, 2000+ years on, Jesus words are ringing alarmingly true. Weather forecasting, based on scientific facts and highly accurate, predicted increased frequency of events like the current drought in England. That drought pales to insignificance beside those that have ravaged parts of Australia, Africa and the USA for years on end. There is good evidence that the droughts and other extreme weather events are of humans' own making. We are raping the planet the way the Babylonians and Romans raped the territories they conquered. We, like their victims, are experiencing a love drought.

Last week I agreed with Diana Butler Bass, who, in her book "Freeing Jesus", suggested that dropping the 'g' from God's 'kingdom' to leave 'kindom' made his gift to the little flock more meaningful. In a Kindom, people sacrifice their personal needs for the benefit of others, whereas in a kingdom, people deny themselves to please a king. That suggestion is also helpful today as we grapple with the divisiveness of words: division can be eliminated when words are translated into acts of love, the essence of 'kindom': words then, like the grave, lose their sting, whether from God or about God. The future of our planet also looks much brighter

as the setting for God's kindom, instead of a battleground for rival kingdoms. In a kindom, I could see Bertrand Russell and Jesus enjoying a friendly chat over breakfast!

Neville

Footnote: I preceded the sermon by naughtily swapping this prayer of Richard Rohr's for the set collect:

*God, Lord of all creation, lover of life and of everything, please help us to love in our very small way what You love infinitely and everywhere. We thank You that we can offer just this one prayer and that will be more than enough, because in reality every thing and every one is connected, and nothing stands alone. Help us each day to stand for love, for healing, for the good, for the diverse unity of the Body of Christ and all creation, because we know this is what You desire: as Jesus prayed, that all may be one. We offer our prayer together with all the holy names of God, we offer our prayer together with Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

After the sermon we sang "Will you come and follow me": look up the words and I think you will agree with me that this is a 'kindom hymn, just as Richard's prayer is a 'kindom' prayer, unlike the official collect for Pentecost 10.