

Parish of Esher
Christ Church, Esher with St George's, West End

SERMON

Ninth Sunday after Trinity, 18 August 2019
9.00am Sung Communion, St George's, West End
10.30am Parish Communion, Christ Church, Esher
Jeremiah 23.23-29; Psalm 25.1-10; Luke 12.49-56

Revd Jonathan Andrew

I must admit, I don't remember all that much about what we were taught in our preaching training at theological college, but I do remember one piece of advice – and that was that preaching on the easy passages doesn't help the congregation, or the preacher – it's wrestling with the difficult readings, the ones one dreads, that perhaps brings out something new, or moves us on.

It's easy to preach the loving, gentle, inclusive Jesus – more challenging to preach the God who brings fire to the earth, who divides even families, but that's what we're called to look at today.

And this is hard. None of us (or very few of us) likes conflict – we like an easy life, and that includes us clergy - especially in Church of England, and especially in 21st Century when our place in society is less certain than it once was. We're naturally conflict-averse – we're concerned there are few enough in church without driving some of them away by rocking the boat! Who wants to be a Jeremiah, speaking up against the comfortable conventional accepted wisdom of our time? It takes courage to say that the Emperor has no clothes.

But the pendulum of our preaching needs to swing. Of course, we need to paint Jesus as:

- The bringer of reconciliation, but we must recognise that achieving real reconciliation may involve facing and dealing with conflict.

- The comforter, but sometimes true comfort only comes by challenging what's causing the discomfort.
- Accepting and inclusive, but we mustn't pretend that everything is ok when it isn't – sometimes we do need to be judging and discriminating.

The Bible record shows both sides of the coin – but that sets us a dilemma – so it's tempting to go for the soft option:

- To forget how so soon after Jesus' birth, the old man Simeon in the Temple spoke of Jesus as a 'sign of contradiction' - a sign that will be opposed – destined for the falling and rising of many – a Jesus through whom a sword will pierce even his Blessed Mother's heart.
- To forget how, right at the start of Jesus' ministry he's rejected in his home town of Nazareth. We love the story of Jesus' sermon when (using Isaiah's prophesy) he declares himself to be 'the one to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour', but we cut our reading short before the people of Nazareth drive him out of town, and even try to throw him off a cliff.
- And we forget how at the end of Jesus' ministry, his words were accepted by only one of two thieves on their crosses alongside him.

Jesus may be hailed as the 'Prince of Peace' but it's a message of peace that sparks division, argument and worse. His comments about family arguments are a bit unnerving today (when we're used to family arguments and even estrangements), but we also need to read those words in the context of the ancient Middle East (or even today's Middle East) where family obligations trump almost everything – where it's the daughter-in-law's social duty to respect and obey her husband's mother. In Matthew's gospel we read how Jesus denies even his own closest blood relations in favour of those who "hear the word of God and do it".

So Jesus doesn't inoculate us against conflict and disagreement – certainly not in the local church – and certainly not in times of vacancy. We had a bit of that over the last year or so in Hersham and (from what I hear and read in your Parish Profile) not everything has been plain sailing here in Esher either. As in most Surrey parishes you in Esher and we in Hersham have got some strong characters, used to fighting our corners in the board room or wherever, but we need to ask ourselves how that plays out in church. Over the years there

have been occasions when I've been quite shocked by the behaviours of my Christian brothers and sisters – we all think we know better than the Rector how to run a parish, but vehemence, aggression, downright belligerence, or subtle undermining ... ! When I've been at the receiving end, I've desperately tried to be charitable. I try to put it down to people's praiseworthy sense of things being important and worth fighting for, but it can be an effort!

But the question remains what are we Christians called to be – is it to be 'nice' or is it to cause trouble? The first choice – don't rock the boat / don't offend anyone / don't raise our head above the parapet – that's our natural default option (especially in the Church of England), but is it perhaps a cop-out? Are we called to be nice, or to light fires and cause trouble? The first choice may lead to an easy popularity and is the natural habitat of the clergyperson (longing, as we say at St Peter's Hersham, for their parish church to be "at the heart of the community"), but this can degenerate into a commitment to unity at any cost, to moral accommodation. The second path of stirring things up lays one open to comments about 'getting involved in politics' or being harsh and judgemental. How many parish clergy have the courage to preach explicitly on the big issues of the day – to dare, for example, to suggest that that Bible and Christian Social Teaching has a lot to say about Brexit – dare we listen?

Jesus is, of course the Prince of Peace, who prayed that his followers "should be as one", but his command of love, if it means anything, must at times stoke the fires of conflict (with others and in our own hearts). And those conflicts will affect our views on real-world (political if you like) issues of money, territory, family, tribe and nation. To use a term currently popular in the business world, Jesus is the ultimate 'disruptor', and the gospels are a pain in the neck to prudent heads and moderate minds. True peace comes, not by dousing the fire of faith, not by declaring a truce with evil, but by focusing on the one who kindled the fire of love in the first place and, in the light of that revelation, working through our issues. If we have true peace and love in our hearts, that can give us a freedom that sometimes makes us in the eyes of the world, dangerous, divisive and disruptive, people who, like Jeremiah, cannot be bought off or intimidated, by friend or foe. But, remembering also who lit the fire of love, let our words be spoken in such a way as to build up and not to put down.

Amen