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Mattins (May 12th 2019)

Jeremiah 23: 1-6 & 1 Peter 2: 11-17

Strangers and Pilgrims

If I begin "Are you sitting comfortably?" those of a certain age group might be reminded of their childhood, and even hear the piano playing Faure's Dolly Suite. But the question which the Second Lesson set for today poses is "How comfortably should you be sitting?"

In many ways the two Epistles of St Peter are a mystery. The New Testament canon begins in a straight-forward way. Four Gospels, telling the story of Jesus, each in its own way, followed by the Acts of the Apostles telling the story of the Early Church. There are then nine Epistles written by St Paul to various churches in the Mediterranean area, and three written to Timothy and Titus which may or may not be Pauline. And then come a variety of other letters written to Philemon, to the Hebrews (almost certainly not by Paul), others attributed to James, Peter, John and Jude (and equally unlikely to have been from the original Apostles) and finally the Book of Revelation, whose author is anyone's guess.

The Church took some time to decide whether or not to include these books. Much later Martin Luther called the Letter of James "an epistle of straw" and wanted it taken out. What we can say about the First Epistle of Peter, from which we read this morning, is that it wasn't by the Apostle Peter, one of the first followers of Jesus. And writing something as if it comes from someone else was not, at the time, a fraudulent activity – quite the opposite, in the Greek world it was a sign of respect for an ardent follower to write in the name of their hero. Saint Peter was martyred in AD 68 under the Emperor Nero. This letter is most likely to have been written by one of his followers towards the end of the First Century – that is, of "The Common Era" as we must now say so as not to offend atheist snowflakes.

My question about how comfortably we should be sitting arises from what we read in chapter two. On the one hand the first readers are addressed as "strangers and pilgrims", translated in more modern versions as "aliens and exiles". They are living in a pagan society where they should not feel at home. In the midst of an evil culture, and with the fear of persecution ever present, this was not a place where they should feel comfortable at all.

But at the same time, they are urged to accept the authority of every human institution, and to see those in power as sent by God to uphold law and order. "Honour all men" and... "Honour the King". It should actually read "Honour the Emperor" but at the time of the Reformation German

princes and Tudor monarchs read this as fan mail, hence the Authorised Version's ingratiatingly translation. Fortunately, we were spared what follows where slaves are told to obey their masters, however badly they are being treated.

So, what are we to make of this? The easy answer is to suggest that these members of the Early Church are just being told to keep their head down, avoid attracting attention and possible persecution, perhaps for a short time because they were still expecting the imminent Second Coming of Christ. Well that didn't happen, but in the centuries since many Christians have seen these words as an excuse for passivity, shoring up those in power, and – like the leadership of the German Protestant Church in the 1930's – hiding away from the realities of injustice.

What we find in the Christian Gospel as a whole is something far more nuanced. I suggest that it has three main strands.

The first is that there is a duty to uphold social and political structures, where there is legitimate power, and even when that power may be partial and transitional but still the best that can be achieved. Laws may sustain inequality, but without law and order the people perish, and often the least powerful even more so. Our taxation systems may be unfair but we should pay what we're told we owe to maintain civil society.

So, "honour the Emperor". There's no way in which the Early Church would have seen the Roman Emperor in the sense that the early People of Israel saw their king as sent by God. But we need such human institutions, however imperfect, in order to survive and have a chance to thrive. In that sense they are God-given and deserve our respect. Politicians deserve – and indeed, need – our prayers. And if in our own country at present the inherited institutions are losing their power, we should be asking what is taking their place, whether that's a far more frightening abuse of power by the forces of populism, or simply the bleak prospect of atomised individuality.

The second point is that all those who hold power should exercise it with "fear and trembling" because ultimately their power does not belong to them. This is where our First Lesson today comes into play. The prophet Jeremiah railed against what he called the "Shepherds of Israel", against those who had forgotten their responsibilities for the people, who were just using their power to their own advantage. "Watch out" says Jeremiah, because your time will soon be up. The people deserve better: "I will place shepherds over them who will tend them and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing". Indeed, there soon be a new king, one who will do what is just and right in the land".

Jeremiah was clear that all such power comes from God. In this country there was a time when barristers, especially those awarded a KC or QC, and all the judges acknowledged that their authority derives from the monarch, and her authority, through the Coronation Oath, comes from God. If that is now a piece of fiction, how easy it becomes for the judicial process to become part of the political process, as we increasingly see in the United States and Israel.

And for those in the political process, how easily it becomes for the interests of the Party to take precedence over the interests of the nation. You may like to think of this Chapel as a BREXIT-free zone, but what would Jeremiah have to say about "the shepherds of the UK" at the present time? Where are their priorities? The Daily Mail reported this week **, in its usual accurate and fair-minded way, that the number of adults on low incomes who can't afford to buy enough food to eat has doubled in the past 15 years. How many of our current politicians know that, or care about it?

So, the third and final strand is about challenging the status quo. We are, here, "strangers and pilgrims", aliens and exiles. We should not be sitting comfortably. We must live in this world, making the best of it, but we are also called to be different, impatient, fidgety, never really at home. We can never be content with what we find here when something better is possible.

And it also means that we belong to a much larger home. Living our own story, we are also part of a story that goes back through time and connects us especially with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Living in this nation we are also part of a much larger community including the worldwide Church. Living at this time we are also responsible to those who will come after, assuming – as this week's United Nations report has warned us – we leave them a habitable planet. Living this life, we also expect to go beyond it when we pass through the gate of death.

For as the Epistle to the Hebrews says, we are strangers and foreigners, desiring a better country, and "God who is not ashamed to be called our God has prepared for us a city".

** https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-6977449/Number-adults-low-incomes-afford-buy-food-DOUBLED-15-years.html?utm_source=Daily+Media+Digest&utm_campaign=7842b257d0-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_01_08_04_54_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_296e14724b-7842b257d0-248595765