

Sermon for Hinde Methodist Church
Sunday 19th July 2015 11am

Jeremiah 23.1-6
Mark 6.30-34, 53-56

If Jeremiah was a journalist I think he'd upset people. Some would say he's too simple. He places the exile entirely at the feet of Judah's kings. He doesn't contemplate the possibility that anyone else might share responsibility. In his eyes, foreign nations, those with economic clout, the people themselves, have done nothing wrong. And that feels just a little too simple to be real. Others would say his style of campaigning journalism is politically biased. He distorts the facts to fit his, God's (?), politics. And shows no reticence in condemning Judah's kings. But he doesn't just condemn them to bring them down. His condemnation is directed at change. The thing I like about Jeremiah is that, he doesn't bother being nice, or even particularly polite. He tells it as he sees it. And if that involves been accused of simplicity, or political bias, so be it. Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet. But God's appointed him "*over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and replant.*" (Jer. 1.10) And for Jeremiah that involved speaking for God to those – and on behalf of those - on the underside of history. In today's Gospel Jesus isn't doing much talking. He's just getting on with the things Jeremiah condemns the Kings of Judah for not doing. He had compassion on the people who sought him out because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he fed them and taught them. And then, when people came and "*laid the sick in the market-places*", he challenges the rich and the powerful by including the excluded – those on the underside of society - in. It's as political an act as Jeremiah's words are. You may have got where I'm going by now. I suspect some of you will think that what I will say is, either too simple, or too political. Maybe both! Like Jeremiah and Mark, I want to speak of God's promises and the coming of God's Kingdom, and some of us find that threatening...

...As threatening as those who came to mind as soon as I read these readings - the migrants arriving on European shores. The large majority of the 137,000 people who crossed the Mediterranean during the first half of 2015 were fleeing from war, conflict or persecution. One third of the men, women and children who arrived by sea in Italy or Greece are from Syria. The second and third most common countries of origin are Eritrea and Afghanistan. They're getting into un-seaworthy boats, knowing they'll be left to drift, as they wait to be rescued. Some suggest the European benefit system is a "pull-factor" and so Italy was persuaded to stop its search and rescue mission for a while. But I'm sure the "push-factors" are far more powerful. Mussie Zerai is an Eritrean priest who was nominated for this years' Nobel Peace Prize. He says. "*Migrants and refugees are not adventurers or tourists. They are people who are trying to save their skin.*" The war in Syria has displaced 4 million people. 2.2 million Syrians fled to Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. 1.7 million to Turkey and a quarter of a million to North Africa. Many live in refugee camps, where humanitarian aid is insufficient, because only 20 per cent of the UN's appeal has been funded this year. And as ISIS's increased its influence over the region, it endangers life, for all but the most radical. Western involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq - as well as our clandestine support for radical groups that are now part of ISIS – contributed to the current situation. And yet we feel threatened. The presence of thousands of refugees places us under pressure. It's particularly difficult for small islands, and for Italy, and Greece. And the messages given by some voters, in recent elections in the EU, make for a challenging political environment. Yet I find it hard to accept - even in austerity-bound Europe - that we can't offer security to such traumatized people. And my anger about it returned when I read today's Gospel. It insists that our response to people who are suffering must include both humanitarian help and political change.

In the first part of the reading we meet Jesus and his disciples under pressure. He's at the height of his popularity, and to the crowds following him everywhere he's not only a teacher and healer, but a fascinating celebrity. He knows that what the crowd want, is to have their immediate needs, for healing, food or entertainment, met. And when Jesus sees them, he sees them as sheep without a shepherd, and has compassion on them. His compassion is particularly striking because of the circumstances. His disciples

have just returned from their first independent mission, yet because they're always recognised, every conversation they try to have is interrupted. Their defences were down. They were probably not sleeping or eating properly. And they were living on their nerves. Yet even in this defenceless state, Jesus' instincts are to reach out to others, and their needs, first. The disciples have company. They have friends. They're not adrift in a world that does not care. Like the refugees travelling around our globe at the moment, those who sought Jesus out, wanted more than healing from ailments. In first century Palestine, disability and illness was seen as the result of sin and was thought to be contagious, so it led to ostracism from the community. Without healing they would remain outsiders for ever. And as long as they were outsiders they could only live a half-life at best. They may not have embraced Jesus teachings. But they understood the significance of his actions. His healing would enable them to become full participants in the life of their community.

This isn't far from what those crossing the Mediterranean hope for. The idea that we don't have enough resources or enough space is challenged by the first part of the Gospel reading. Even when Jesus was exhausted, even when he did not have the resources to care, he had compassion on those who followed him because they were like a sheep without a shepherd. As Britain and the EU, have argued about what to do with refugees, I've been struck by those who've gone against the grain of public opinion. They offer a glimpse of the promise of newness God promises the exiles. In Mark's Gospel it's the kingdom of God. Christopher and Regina Catrambone were on a sailing holiday off the Italian coast when they saw a jacket float past their boat. They spent their life savings on a rescue ship. And since August they've rescued 3000 people. In May they began a new operation with Médecins San Frontières. *"No one deserves to die,"* they say, *"and we will do everything in our power to ensure that those who feel compelled to undertake this treacherous sea crossing in makeshift vessels do not drown."* In June Sea Watch was launched by a group of friends from Brandenburg. Daniel Shepherd speaks for them. *"These migrants are human beings, we make no judgment about [them]...there is a state duty to assist and that is perhaps not being adhered to."* On Kos and other Greek islands, holiday makers and local people are taking the refugees water, sandwiches and they're giving lifts for the weakest. Not everyone is sympathetic. One tourist said to a journalist. *"This is testing the patience of people... tourists... come to get away from the terrible news of wars and whatnot, not to see it. They shouldn't be allowed to land."* [He continues] *One of the elderly fish sellers on the harbour-side scolds her: 'Lady, you'd rather have bodies on the beaches? We knew war here too once.'*" He joins those on Lampedusa, who see it as their duty to care for the tattered, exhausted refugees, reaching their island. The instinct to see with compassion, to offer help, support and friendship, mirrors Jesus' instincts, precisely. In it we glimpse God's Kingdom. It's what we're all called to do and be for our neighbours.

"Like sheep without a shepherd." I think it's an appropriate phrase for refugees from persecution, war and oppressive regimes. They've been failed by the rulers of their own countries. They're been failed by the international community as well as the European community of nations who see them as people to be kept out, a problem to be solved, rather than our neighbours who have lived through trauma. And when they reach somewhere and claim asylum, they're failed again, as they're put in detention or become homeless when they gain it. God judges shepherds who don't take care of their flock. Jeremiah isn't, of course, concerned with real livestock and shepherds. He's using a common metaphor from the ancient Near East to speak of human kings and leaders as shepherds to the people. The duties and responsibilities of shepherds were well-known to ancient readers. Shepherds are supposed to take care of their sheep. To feed them, protect them, and guide them. Psalm 23 says it in beautiful, poetic language. But the theme is a familiar one on the Hebrew Scriptures. The kings have not been good shepherds, so the sheep are in exile, scattered among the nations. Jeremiah has a narrow theological and ethical perspective. He blames the kings of Judah for the exiles. *"Woe to the shepherds!"*

The second part of today's Gospel reading is a short, seemingly innocuous, summary of Jesus' activities. But they are significant words. Because Mark uses them to explain how the kingdom of God is upending the economy of this world, and inviting us, to see everything from the underside as God sees. As Jesus and

the disciples land, from their second sea crossing, the people rush about *“the whole region,”* bringing the sick to him. *“And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces...”* The word translated here as “marketplace” wasn’t simply market-places as we know them. They were also refers to the public spaces where legal hearings, elections, and debates took place. They were the political as well as the commercial centres of villages, towns and cities. And it was in these places that Jesus heals the sick, and tends to the weakest, and the most vulnerable in his community. He takes over the places of “legitimate” business - the places that most usually belong to the rich and powerful - and occupies them for humanly significant business. In them, he welcomes and includes the littlest and last, the sick, the vulnerable and the weak, those who have no place in his community. And as he includes them in, he changes the nature of the places and the people, who gather there. No longer are the market-places places for the worthy, the insider, those with legitimate passports. Now, the unworthy, the outsider, and those were insecure and unprotected by their country of origin are present too. All are together. And it’s only when we’re together - giving and receiving and offering each other compassion - that we ever can be a sign of God’s kingdom.

Communities that exclude the weakest and most vulnerable are challenged by the values of God’s kingdom. Mussie Zerai lives in Switzerland now. He says Europe has the wrong approach to refugees. Instead of closing the doors, we should be welcoming them, offering protection, making more effort to challenge the causes of the migration and changing our policies to meet real needs. Each country needs to take responsibility for welcoming refugees. At the moment, refugees must apply for asylum in the first country he or she arrives, in. Many don’t register there. They travel to where they have relatives, friends, or a community of their people. Last year Switzerland sent 2,000 Eritreans back to Italy. Zerai says welcoming people into Switzerland expresses solidarity, not just with asylum seekers, but with Italy too. In the early 1980s, I was watching the news of race riots in Bristol, with my flat mates. One, to my complete amazement said, “they should all go home.” Before I stormed out, I said 3 of the 5 of us had better go back to Ireland, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Our parents or grandparents came as refugees, prisoners of war, or necessary workers. “That’s not what I mean,” she said, “No,” I said, “I know exactly what you mean but my point still stands.” I don’t understand why we can’t see what migrants bring to us. Migration has renewed nations down the centuries. And all the evidence shows that on balance it is more positive than negative. The second thing we must do is search for solutions in their countries of origin. Dictatorships in Africa need challenging through political, diplomatic and economic means. Stopping the war in Syria and Iraq and restoring order to Libya would probably require a miracle. So a more realistic goal might be to encourage refugees to stay put. But only if the UN is better funded, and traffickers who recruit from badly run camps, are constrained. And this will require as much political will as diplomatic means. Zerai recently received a phone call from the Libyan coast. A group of 60 refugees had clashed with local forces who were trying to grab the “merchandise”. (Yes I did say that). Change takes time. So in the meantime, there needs to be a concerted effort *“to protect people, [and] create decent living conditions, as well as work and study opportunities in neighbouring countries.”* At the same time the European asylum system needs to be changed, so people are not trapped in Greece or Italy, who are struggling to offer the best they can. When David Cameron insisted that Britain opt out of quotas for migrants, because we’re offering aid, I felt ashamed. Humanitarian aid isn’t enough. Until people have legitimate means of finding security, they will continue to risk their lives because corrupt traffickers – the only alternatives to good shepherds - will be their only way of escaping terrors we cannot begin to imagine.

Asylum seekers are about the most unpopular group of people in Europe just now. Between March and May, asylum seekers from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Iraq, Sudan, Libya and Syria turned up at our Day Centre. And they housed 28. At the Staff Conference Jamie and Karen, the project workers who do most work with them, said they met afraid, humiliated and ashamed people. Yet they are in awe of their ability to endure and to use this to support each other. Through Jeremiah, God promises newness to the exiles from Judah, when the old cannot be mended. The old life will be lost – but a new life will be given. Life will be lost – and then given again. Surely this is what should happen in a civilized world when people seek refugee from war, conflict and persecution? But we, who have so much and are unable to let go our grasp of some of it, seem unable to see this. So not only do we deny the most vulnerable people life. We deny

fullness of resurrection life to ourselves too. For as long as we do not have compassion, as long as we refuse to make space for our neighbours, we live in a broken world. Yet God's word is that new life will only be given when we take the risk of losing the old. Refugees show us that every day. And I have glimpsed it, in those who offer help, or to speak out on their behalf. In the midst of Jeremiah's unwavering condemnation of the kings, the bad shepherds, God promises to change everything. God will be their shepherd. God will provide a king who *"will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord."* *"Nor shall any be missing..."* For us, the righteous king is Jesus, but we know we cannot stop there. For Jesus invites us to have compassion on, to care for, those *"like sheep without a shepherd"*, and to bring them into the centre of our market-places. Then, when we lose life as we know it, God will give it back. God will give it back to us all. Amen.

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