

**Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> August 2022, 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity, Proper 17**

*Jeremiah 23: 23-29; Psalm 82; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56*

Some words from Psalm 82: “all the foundations of the earth are out of course.” It’s one of those Sundays... I looked through the readings hopefully seeking some gem to brighten things up. We begin with a very fierce God who can see absolutely everything that’s going on and is wielding fire and a hammer. (Not a good start...) The psalm tells us that God is judge and all the foundations of the earth are out of course. The gospel depicts Jesus at the opposite end of the “gentle Jesus meek and mild” spectrum. He’s bringing division not peace; and he’s not impressed with human failure to see and understand what’s going on under everyone’s noses. The letter to the Hebrews describes faith as demonstrated by a random selection of OT heroes and heroines, but apparently that same faith led to a long list of atrocities for others in martyrdom. A glimmer of hope comes with the promise of perfection through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, the only way also open to his followers and the faithful, present and past – the baptism of which the gospel speaks, leading to perfection. It’s a challenging line-up.

But then, so is the world as we look at it today – war with Russia in Ukraine; a coming recession as part of the economic crisis and rise in the cost of living, putting far too many people below the poverty line; and above all, looming environmental disaster. I felt like going to bed and pulling the covers over my head. But it’s too hot. Oh yes, there’s another heatwave and drought has officially been declared.

So, I’m going to abandon the readings for a moment and approach things from a different direction. During this last week, I and my husband have watched two very different programmes on television, but both illustrating a world where bad and sad things

happen. The first was the Revd. Richard Coles' moving documentary entitled Good Grief, produced as part of a very personal attempt to navigate a way through the intensity of bereavement from the death of his life partner, his husband, from alcoholism. He is facing the death of the one person in his life who meant more than any other. Ironically, as a parish priest, he has sat beside, walked beside, agonised with countless bereaved people. But he says that then he was always on the outside looking in, going through familiar patterns and dynamics; but now he is inside. and he is experiencing madness. The foundations of his world are out of course. People cross the road to avoid the recently widowed. They don't want to come face to face with the outrage of death and bereavement.

The film asks whether there can be such a thing as a "good grief", so in his quest for an answer he tried everything from laughter yoga to boxing, via skydiving and surfing – outlets for physical energy. He also went on a bereavement cruise. Personally, I'd rather skydive... The one time he wept was on a widows' retreat where music finally made him cry. Whichever activity he was engaged in he was facing reality, facing the truth. Painful, agonizing at times, "We are unprepared" he says, "for these disabling moments of loss."

The second film we watched was "Benediction" released last year. It tells of the First World War poet Siegfried Sassoon, beginning with his return from the trenches, wounded and decorated for bravery. He wrote an anti-war protest published in the Times, criticising the war effort as one of conquest and not defence, and deploring the needless loss of life. He faced down the military leaders. He should have been court-martialled, but friends in high places got him sent to a mental hospital in Scotland where he met fellow poet, Wilfred Owen and spoke for the first time of "the love that dare not speak its name." The film is

more a poetic meditation on moods and events, war and homosexuality, than the narration of a story. It makes real for us the sights and sounds of warfare that tormented Sassoon for the rest of his life, all the boys and men slaughtered whom he could not forget, and the terrible isolation of those who endured the horrors of war, alongside his alienation from the prevailing expectations of the time because of his homosexuality. The film is called *Benediction*, benediction being the last prayer of a religious service, the blessing. The last poem we hear in the film is entitled "Disabled", and is the one Owen wrote for Sassoon when they were in Scotland:

"He sat in a wheelchair, waiting for dark,  
And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey,  
Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park  
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,  
Voices of play and pleasure after day,  
Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him."

This poem is presented over the image of an injured, legless soldier in a wheelchair, a symbol of impotence and worthlessness, an object of pity. It is a perfect embodiment of Sassoon's work and of his survivor's guilt and yet a final moment of grace, a closing prayer, a benediction in a world whose foundations are out of course.

I feel presumptuous speaking about both Richard Coles and Siegfried Sassoon. Personally, I have never been through remotely similar experiences. Yet there is something about both of these films that seems to chime with today's readings – and especially the line with which I began – "the foundations of the earth are out of course." Such a realisation is not the cue for turning away, for ignoring the pain and suffering. It's a cue for facing up to

all the agonies of life. Both these films do that. They are both real. They are both facing reality in all its uncompromising messiness.

And so are today's readings. Jeremiah slams into the false prophets of his day as God might do with fire and hammer. False prophets do not face reality – "I have dreamed, I have dreamed..." but evidently not with any divine inspiration, for the words and dreams of false prophets are self-invented and lead people astray. They build up superficial optimism by promising what they think people want in order to gain popularity. A true prophet speaks God's word however uncomfortable, unpopular and unfashionable. The more the world feels off course, the more tempting it is to follow the false promises of the deceivers.

Jesus' message in the gospel is not comfortable and he is impatient with the disciples for failing to see the signs of the times, failing to look at the big picture. Their world was increasingly "out of course", as is ours, but Jesus gives no comfortable pleasantries. People will disagree with his message. There will always be those who seek the comfortable option, who want to avoid challenge, who run away from truth and reality, and people who crave privilege and worldly greatness. In one of his addresses to the Lambeth Conference, the Archbishop of Canterbury referred to what Peter called "the roaring lions," the sense of hostility, danger and uncertainty that Christians bear. Our personal fears, pressures and burdens make the lions seem more powerful than God's love. Fear blinds us to the truth of God's love. The final lion to which the archbishop refers "comes stealthily and with a gentle bite." He is referring to today's culture which seeks to construct itself apart from God and which has lost even the memory of Christianity especially amongst our young people and which surrounds us without our noticing, seeping insidiously into our lives. It accepts violence both in war and against women; and sees no

harm in pornography. It's a culture opposed to the values of the Kingdom. False prophets abound in such a culture. But, like the disciples, most of the time we simply don't see it.

We can face anything if we have faith, as today's reading from Hebrews reminds us – cross the Red Sea, bring down the walls of Jericho, shut the mouths of lions, quench raging fire – you name it. Yet for others, faith led to martyrdom by every atrocity imaginable, and even then, the martyrs of old won't receive the promised perfection until we join them in that perfection. They are the “great cloud of witnesses” who surround us. They are not just spectators idly watching what's going on. They have witnessed to it. They have testified. They have been prepared to stand up and be counted. Maybe they are here to witness us now as they surround us, to see whether we do intend to throw off everything that hampers us, to set to and do something about those foundations of the earth that are out of course, to witness in our turn to the reality and truth that is God, however costly.

In the Lambeth Conference, the assembled bishops considered the Call on Human Dignity which included discussion on human sexuality and same sex marriage. Foundations must have felt out of course on both sides of the argument. Jesus said he had come to bring division, and this is indeed an issue on which the Church is deeply divided. The bishops emerged, as Bishop John and Bishop Martin said, “committed to listening and walking together to the maximum possible degree, despite deep disagreements.” In a letter to the clergy of this diocese Bishops John and Martin apologise for the hurt caused by media misrepresentation, and they affirm and give thanks for the gift that LGBTQI+ people are to the Church and the world. And the Bishop of Monmouth wrote in the Church Times that we (the bishops) can feel that “we are bound together with something stronger than our context, our experience, our views and opinions, our reading of scripture. We are held

together in the love of Christ, and we have to honour the fact that we are working in massively different contexts.” Perhaps, strengthened by such rays of hope, we can do our bit however small, to set the foundations of the earth back on course. May we remember, with the bishops, that the Call on Human Dignity means confronting anything that threatens that human dignity – poverty, violence, abuse and prejudice of every kind, including any exclusion of the gay community, ignoring the disabled in wheelchairs, or ignoring the recently and agonisingly bereaved.

Bishop John commits us to a process of open listening and reflection and so we pray in the words of today’s collect: “Open our hearts to the riches of your grace, that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in love and joy and peace. Amen”

Revd Charmian Manship