Sermon for 24th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10.

i

I don’t know what they mean when they say, “It’s too cold for snow.” But I do know when there’s too much wind for a kite; or the sailing ship has to reef its sails in a storm.

The prevailing wind in Israel is a gentle, moist, cooling breeze from the Mediterranean. But when it comes from the south over the Negev, it becomes a furnace-like blast. A gentle breeze is useful for winnowing the chaff from the grain – a breeze for winnowing the grain is a symbol of controlled power, of gentle change and gradual renewal.

But Jeremiah is promising no gentle breeze, but a whirlwind (v13).

The whirlwind symbolises frightening, uncontrollable and unpredictable power. It presages destruction, danger and possible death.

This is Jeremiah’s shocking warning to Judah – and he has in mind the approaching threat of the Babylonians who will sweep in from the East across the parched sands as an avenging army to mete out the judgement of God.

Jeremiah’s poetic vision foresees the destruction of the nation being mirrored by the barrenness of the natural world.

In one sense it is still a poetic vision of future disaster, but in another sense, it harks back to the beginning of time in *Genesis*, as the earth once again becomes “formless and empty”, the stars and heavenly bodies disappear, the mountains sink, the birds of the air are no more and all the people are gone (vv23-26).It is as if the whirlwind has unwound time itself. The world has been turned back to the beginning; everything has been lost.

Judah has repeatedly sought risky military alliances with Egypt to take on the power of Babylon against all Jeremiah’s advice. Instead of renewing their faith and trusting in God, they have risked everything in a political game they are about to lose.

ii

Whilst Jeremiah had the fate of the whole nation in mind, St Paul lived through his own whirlwind of destruction, chaos and renewal on the personal level.

Paul sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind. He called down the wrath of God upon the heads of the Christians. Paul volunteered to direct and administer God’s awful justice; for Paul was in control and Paul knew what God wanted.

As we know, Paul reaped the whirlwind. On the road to Damascus, Paul’s past life was blown away, gone forever. All his past accomplishments as a Pharisee and scholar suddenly counted for nothing. When writing to the *Philippians,* Paul says his past life was rubbish, refuse, or junk (Phil 3:8).

So what was so special in his new life with Christ compared to his old life?

The answer is: grace.

The focus for Paul is no longer what Paul can do for God, but what God in Christ has done for Paul.

Paul has been shown mercy and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ has been poured on him abundantly (1 Tim 1:13-14).

Of sinners, Paul claims to be among the worst, as he actually fought against Christ by persecuting the Church, but Paul believes the example of his total transformation serves as an example of Christ’s redeeming power. If someone who so hated Christ can become one of Christ’s chief apostles, then there is hope for anyone in this world, no matter what their sins.

This is good news for all who offend God by living lives in “ignorance and unbelief” as Paul himself once did (1 Tim 1:13).

It is also a challenge to us, especially Methodists who claim they have been raised by God to spread “scriptural holiness” throughout the world. “Scriptural holiness” may sound rather quaint, and it does today have an unpleasant whiff of Victorian moralism and repression to it, but essentially, it is about believing the faith we proclaim can and should have measurable, visible effect upon all believers.

If belonging to Christ does not change our hearts, minds and lives, how can we say we have a living faith? Why should the world believe, if believing makes no discernible difference to how we live?

Where is the grace in that? How does that warm anyone’s heart?

But grace isn’t something we “do” – it is something we “receive” – as the parable of the Lost Sheep makes plain.

iii

All we have to do is get ourselves lost. In our complex world of competing philosophies, alluring worldly treasures and difficult moral choices, it is easy for any one of us to take a wrong turn in life, isolate ourselves from our family and community, or go ignorantly along a false path towards a happiness that isn’t there.

Any one of us can face the whirlwind, when our lives crash down around us and all seems lost. Any one of us can know what it is to stand among the debris of our dreams; our past scattered like refuse at our feet. There are examples in our newspapers most weeks.

The Lost Sheep is not the most valuable, or the friendliest, the youngest or the oldest, the smartest or the cutest – it is just lost.

The sheep plays no part in its rescue. It doesn’t even walk back to the flock, but is carried by the shepherd.

Grace is about what the shepherd does – not about the sheep. All we hear about the sheep is that it is lost – and having 99 safely in the pen does not make the 100th too unimportant to find. No one is deemed too marginal for grace: as Charles Wesley’s hymn puts it:

Thy sovereign grace to all extends,

Immense and unconfined;

From age to age it never ends,

It reaches all mankind.

Throughout the world its breadth is known,

Wide as infinity,

So wide it never passed by one;

Or it had passed by me.

Jeremiah was right about the coming whirlwind. But his promise that after the wreckage of exile, God would one day write a new covenant upon their hearts came true in Jesus Christ.

Paul’s life was scattered across the road to Damascus; but that was not the end, but the beginning of a new life.

But we, like Paul, have to let go and allow God to carry us, like the sheep that rests across the shepherd’s shoulders.

I remember the very first time I went to the swimming baths; I was taken by an uncle with some of my cousins. He stood up to his waist in the three feet of water, held out his arms and invited me to jump.

The others did, but I refused and went in down the steps. I’m still a poor and under-confident swimmer to this day. I wonder if it might have been otherwise, had I dared to jump?

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