Sermon for 26th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31.

i

Jeremiah has spent the last 40 years predicting doom and destruction raining down upon Jerusalem for its naïve trust in political and military alliances rather than repenting and trusting in God for their safety. On the eve of his prophecy finally about to happen – when the whole city has at last come to believe they are facing catastrophe at the hands of the approaching Babylonian army – Jeremiah goes out and buys a field – as a sign that they will get their land and freedom back one day!

After 40 years of saying God would not guarantee their land, he then says that ultimately God can indeed be trusted to bring them safely home. It appears to be a remarkable volte-face, but actually it is fully consistent with his message – salvation will come, a new covenant will be granted, a remnant shall return, but only after Judah has faced the punishment it deserves.

God is merciful and trustworthy – but God isn’t a soft-touch. Sin really matters. Sin has awful consequences. Sin does too much harm to be simply ignored. Sin will have to be dealt with – and only God can ultimately deal with sin.

In Jeremiah’s day, he thought God was dealing with Judah’s sin through the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile in Babylon. But God, being both merciful and trustworthy, as well as being a fair judge of sin, will one day make a fresh start with his people through a new covenant.

To purchase a field on the eve of invasion is foolhardy in the extreme and one could suppose that Jeremiah’s cousin is pulling a fast one to offload his land onto Jeremiah, to turn his land into transportable silver which he could take with him into Exile or as a refugee to Egypt.

Jeremiah nonetheless honours his family duties to keep the land in the family – note how remarkable is the transformation for the first Christians who readily gave their land away to the Church because they had a “heavenly land” in prospect.

Jeremiah sees this purchase as the God-sent opportunity to declare that Jerusalem – after it has been destroyed - will rise again – in a way, this is a story of resurrection.

The sealed scroll was simply a guarantee that the details of the transaction recorded in the unsealed scroll could not be tampered with – any alleged forgery could be proved by comparing it to the sealed scroll.

Christians are reminded of the sealed scroll of *Revelation 5:9* which the slain Lamb of God alone is worthy to unseal – in other words, no one else can tamper with the judgements of God; the Son is the only one worthy to unseal the final judgement upon the earth.

Jeremiah’s prophecy of return after the Exile, unthinkable at the time, did eventually come true – but that “resurrection” was clearly not sufficient to keep the People of God faithful.

They returned home, the city and the temple rose again from the ashes – but by the time John the Baptist appeared, the axe was once again set at the root of the tree.

ii

Jesus shows little confidence that his imminent and literal resurrection will have any more effect on some than the political resurrection in Jeremiah’s prophecy.

Jesus uses a traditional Jewish parable and gives it an unexpected twist in order to get his warning across.

The first change Jesus makes is to give the poor man a name – Lazarus – meaning “God has helped”. The poor man may have been a nameless nobody during his life, ignored by the wealthy and powerful, but he was always a known and cherished individual to God.

The second more significant change is that according to the traditional form of the parable, the poor man **is allowed** to go and warn the rich man’s relatives. Jesus changes this and says there are no more warnings to come.

The last and ultimate warning on what leads to life everlasting and what leads to eternal damnation – and we don’t need to accept the traditional picture literally to get the point – is about to be given: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In Jesus’ telling of the parable, the rich man suggests that if Lazarus goes back from the dead and warns his brothers, they will surely repent. Jesus is not so sure they will. Whether that faithfully reflects Jesus’ sober assessment, or has been added in the light of Christian persecution at the hands of Jewish authorities by Luke is uncertain.

However, the point is made: A final warning is about to be given; the judgment of the world is taking place and there are no appeals – because fair warning has been given in “Moses and the prophets” (v29) and of course, in the imminent resurrection of Jesus.

The unchangeable utterly dependable promise of God is a feature of Jeremiah’s story too. The document of sale is placed within a clay jar for safe, long-term keeping – and we know from the Dead Sea Scrolls how long such documents can survive under the right conditions.

The imagery is that once God has declared something, then that promise or warning remains in force. It is as if once written down it becomes evidence that cannot be denied. Jeremiah’s document of sale was his evidence of Jerusalem’s promised future restoration.

Jesus offers “Moses and the prophets” and his own resurrection. That’s God’s final word. Everlasting judgement depends on whether you respond or not.

iii

Paul’s *First Letter to Timothy* gives us a glimpse of how the first Christians struggled with their new situation; they were **in** this world, but were called to be no longer **of** this world; were they to give all their worldly wealth away or were they to learn a new attitude and responsibility towards their worldly wealth?

We know of the short experiment in *Acts 5* of Christians pooling all their worldly wealth – but that doesn’t seem to have been repeated elsewhere.

Here in *1Timothy 6* we see a different attempt to find a new Christian way to deal with wealth.

Paul recommends simple contentment with a modest life – to be happy with the necessities of life – food and clothing.

He cautions against wanting to get rich, because such people “fall into temptation and …into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evil” (vv9-10).

To those Christians who come from the privileged levels of society, Paul advises:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, but to put their hope in God…Command them to do good…and to be generous and willing to share…so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life (1Tim 6:17-19).

I think we can infer from this that those who experience the resurrection life of Christ are just as likely to lose it again as those who experienced the political resurrection promised by Jeremiah.

Keeping faithful to God whilst living in a world of alluring pleasures remains as big a challenge today as it was to Adam and Eve who took the apple because it looked “pleasing to the eye” (Genesis 3:6).

If even the resurrection of Christ from the grave is insufficient guarantee that God is more important than money, that this world’s treasures are not comparable to the treasures of heaven, then there really is not much more that God can do. The consequences will be upon our own heads.

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