Sermon for 28th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Jeremiah 29:1,4-7; 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19.

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It’s an awful position to be in when people expect you to have good news to share and you only have bad news. Anyone who has ever told a pupil they have failed an exam; any instructor who has failed someone on their driving test and any doctor who has delivered the bad news despite the surgery, will know just how truly awful that position can be.

Jeremiah is famed for being the prophet who always had bad news. That is unfair of course, because Jeremiah did offer the promise of future return from Exile and the prospect of a new covenant, but his whole ministry is overshadowed by the years of dismal warnings of impending doom.

Today’s passage from Jeremiah 29 is certainly one of those gloomier bits. He writes to those taken in the first, smaller deportation to Babylon in 597BC and warns them that they should settle in for a long wait for any good news. Build houses, plant gardens, marry and have children – these are long term plans and dash any hopes of a quick return to Jerusalem.

Jeremiah paid the price for his unpopular message and was thrown down a dry well for a few days to shut him up. Paul is paying a price too for his candid proclamation of the Gospel. He has received a lot of rough treatment from his fellow Jews in Philippi, Ephesus and Jerusalem; now as he writes to his protégé Timothy, Paul is under arrest and chained like a common criminal in Rome (2 Tim 2:9).

Timothy also has his hands full trying to resist false teaching - 2 Tim 4:2-5 – and Paul warns Timothy there will be times when people will make up their own doctrine to suit their own desires, and teachers will teach what their ears are itching to hear. At such difficult moments Timothy is urged by Paul to “keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist and discharge the duties of your ministry.”

It is impossible to please all of the people all of the time in any profession and that is equally true of ministry. Some ministers are afraid of confrontation and avoid contentious subjects, often to the detriment of their congregations, because they believe Christian faith should bring harmony and peace to the world. Some prefer the quiet life to upsetting the people, especially upsetting the local power brokers on the parish council or the power brokers in the church hierarchy. The Church has suffered a lot of damage from ministers who have simply trotted out the acceptable group-think of the Establishment, rather than risk the controversy of prophetic ministry.

Peter fell prey to this temptation when he refused to eat with the Gentiles in Galatia, despite having pronounced Cornelius the Gentile would never be deemed “unclean” again. If Wesley had cared more about his reputation and his personal safety than he did for obeying the Holy Spirit, Methodism would never have left the colleges of Oxford.

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Other preachers, however, revel in being controversial and seem to assume that the more people disagree with them the more in the right they must be. This brings us to the conundrum of discernment: how do we recognise when someone we disagree with is telling us a truth we don’t want to face and how do we know when we are right in resisting because they are truly bad ideas?

Unfortunately, truth isn’t a democrat; we cannot simply assume the majority view is always the right one; but we must at least respect the majority view and be very sure of ourselves before we strike out in another direction. The collective wisdom of the Church cannot be easily dismissed.

For Jeremiah, and for Paul, time itself was enough to prove that they had in fact been right all along; but that is small comfort for you if you are the one thrown into the bottom of a well, or chained up like a common criminal; or simply can’t wait that long for an answer.

Paul advises Timothy to discern the nature of the argument itself, before engaging in any struggle. He differentiates between quarrels that are about “mere words” and disputes about the “word of truth.” The first task is to judge whether the victory merits the battle; too many churches tear themselves apart over relatively minor differences.

Do not put the Body of Christ at risk of injury over a matter of little consequence to the prospects of salvation for the world. You may feel passionately about whether women can be bishops, gay people may preach the Gospel or whether pastors may place a bet in the Melbourne Cup – but keep those disputes within reasonable bounds – do not tear the Church to pieces and deter people from seeking salvation – because of your disputatious character.

Even if you are right, you do not have to win every argument.

The Church has always been aware that there is a rightful distinction between core beliefs and peripheral beliefs and practices, but she has struggled from the beginning to define what belongs to the core, for which every sinew must be stretched in defence, and what belongs to the periphery, best reserved for academic essays or to be decided according to local tastes.

The great Creeds of the Church were attempts to find a globally binding set of core beliefs, and the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed have stood the test of time remarkably well; but they haven’t prevented all the arguing. Historians will recall the big argument over one iota in the creed.

The Catholics talk about a “hierarchy of truths”; Wesley spoke of the marrow of the faith and mere opinions in a similar way to keep disputes to a minimum and allow for unity with diversity, whilst not risking the core of the Gospel that should bind all Christians together.

In his famously eirenic *Letter to a Roman Catholic* Wesley says to any opponents:

*If then we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least may we love alike.*

Wesley spoke of this same theme in two sermons in particular. In Sermon 38: *Against Bigotry,* he defines bigotry as “too strong an attachment to, or fondness for, our own party, opinion, Church and religion.” In his better known Sermon 39: *The Catholic Spirit*, written in 1755 in the aftermath of troubles in Ireland, Wesley repeats the mantra, “though we cannot think alike, may we love alike” and continues:

*To be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity. [Every thinking man] knows in general, that he himself is mistaken; although in what particulars he mistakes, he does not, perhaps cannot know.*

Accepting human fallibility, Wesley states:

*God has given no right to any of the children of men thus to lord it over the conscience of his brethren; but every man must judge for himself, as every man must give an account of himself to God.*

Wesley was unusually open, by the standards of his day, to extending the hand of fellowship to those who belonged to other Church traditions which, in his view, did not preach the Word of God faithfully, nor duly celebrate the sacraments, because he believed the ethic of Christian love overruled all other considerations. So Wesley continued in his Sermon on the *Catholic Spirit* that if you love God, if you believe in Jesus Christ, if you are trying to do God’s will, if you love your neighbour, then:

*If thou art thus minded…then ‘thy heart is right, as my heart is with thy heart. If it be, give me thy hand.’ I do not mean, ‘Be of my opinion.’ You need not…Neither do I mean, ‘I will be of your opinion.’ I cannot…Let all opinions alone on one side, and the other: Only ‘give me thine hand.’*

This is not an invitation to be either vacuous, or vacillating. It is about living in harmony with those who have equally strong moral and religious convictions to your own, but to make love the greater part.

To be authentically Methodist you must foster Wesley’s “catholic spirit”.

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This means that the Church will always be a mixture of truth and nonsense. It was always thus and the New Testament recognizes it.

Paul used the analogy of erecting a building in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*; he says that Jesus has laid the true foundation, but then it is up to us Christians to decide how we build upon that. Some will build in gold and silver and precious stones, whilst others will build in wood and hay – and significantly, we may not be able to discern the difference until the final judgement when all is tested as by fire (1 Cor 3:1-15).

In his letter to Timothy, Paul uses the image of a completed building, saying that any large house will contain items of both silver and gold, as well as items of wood and clay (2 Tim 2:20).

The story of the 10 lepers healed by Jesus in Luke 17:11-19 also raises this issue of discernment. The story takes place on the border between Samaria and Galilee; the group of lepers is (by inference) a mixed bunch of 9 Jews and 1 Samaritan; they behave appropriately according to the Jewish Law and keep their distance from others and therefore shout to Jesus from a safe distance. They all show a measure of discernment in that they address Jesus as “Master” and have some confidence that he will have pity upon them.

This may have been simply a form of address to anyone from whom they sought gifts of food or money – showing exaggerated respect by addressing them as a social superior, “Master,” in the hope their flattery might reach the traveller’s purse.

Or it could easily have been more than that; they may be acting upon recognizing Jesus and his disciples (for they had spent much of their time around Galilee) and they may well have known of his healing abilities. After mass healings in Capernaum and his miracle at the wedding at Cana, it is hard to imagine they didn’t know exactly who Jesus was.

As with the centurion’s servant and the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter, Jesus heals at a distance by a word of command. He sends the lepers off to show themselves to the priests, who would have the authority to permit them back into the community upon proof that their leprosy, or whatever skin disease, had now gone. By so starting that journey in faith towards the priests, they discovered they were cleansed. (Luke 17:14).

All 10 of the lepers had correctly discerned Jesus’s willingness and ability to help them, but only the Samaritan had shown the greater discernment of recognizing Jesus as God’s representative – which he demonstrates by his posture of worship, falling prostrate at Jesus’ feet.

In his advice to Timothy (v8), Paul urges him in moments of disputation and bewilderment to “remember Jesus”; this word is the word used by Christ at the Last Supper: “Do this in remembrance of me.” It denotes something far more powerful than simply, think about Jesus; but rather call upon him so that he is present with you in this moment – either in prayer and supplication – or in the Eucharist.

That is the place of true discernment – the presence of Jesus.

On occasions we do not know which way to turn; we can see right and wrong on both sides; we find the matter too complex for our understanding; we just do not know what to think to do the right thing.

But the greatest discernment we can make is that Jesus is our Saviour and the Son of God. If our decisions and instincts on difficult and disputed matters bring us safely and with good conscience to the feet of our Master, then perhaps we may judge that we have chosen correctly; or at the very least we are not totally wrong.

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