

## Sermon preached in Saint Andrew's, St Andrews, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2017

Jeremiah 15.15-21

Matthew 16.21-end

I saw a girl a few days ago, as I was navigating the heavy pedestrian traffic of the Festival in Edinburgh, wearing a brightly coloured T-shirt on the back of which was emblazoned: 'The LORD is my strength and my song' (Exodus 15.2). The Bible is full of vivid images for God, and many of them find their way duly onto the mugs, key-rings, T-shirts and other Christian paraphernalia that can be purchased in Christian bookshops or at Christian festivals.

'The LORD is my strength and my song'. Well, it was a warm, sunny day, and the meeting I had been to had finished early; so the sight of that bright and cheery T-shirt resonated with my mood.

It struck me, though, as I was preparing for this sermon, that the *kitsch* end of Christian consumerism is a bit selective in its sentiments, and provides much more fully for the bright and breezy mood than it does for other seasons in life, or the times when our experience of God is a bit more complicated. And I couldn't help reflecting that this was all to do with marketability. After all, take the prophet Jeremiah's bit of impromptu poetry in verse 18 of today's reading: 'Truly, LORD, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail'. There's an image, I thought, unlikely ever to sell many bumper stickers.

Jeremiah, of course, is letting off steam, venting his disappointment, his resentment, his anger against God. Why? Because he has been faithful to his calling, has done exactly what God asked him to do, more or less, and as a result has suffered insult, humiliation, rejection, wounding – a perpetual stream of hurt, an incessant infliction of pain. And God has let it all happen, remaining silent, seemingly absent, inactive; setting Jeremiah up, and then leaving him exposed when the torrent of opposition and persecution began. That's the point of the image: God is like a deceitful stream: cleansing and refreshing as Jeremiah splashed around in the early days of his call and response. 'Your words were found, Lord', he says, 'and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart'. But then, as Jeremiah took those words and proclaimed them and embodied them and acted them out, the gushing waters of God's presence and support slowed, and then reduced to a trickle, and then evaporated altogether. A deceitful stream, which promised so much, but whose waters failed precisely when the heat was on.

Perhaps the first thing to take from this reading is Jeremiah's honesty. Unlike us, he's not afraid to speak his mind to God, even to lose his rag with God. Why? Because he's hurting, and despairing, and he feels abandoned and angry. 'Deceitful', and 'failing' are strong words to bandy around, even in purely human contexts. And there's a certain refreshing courage in Jeremiah's willingness to let loose and vent his anger and disappointment and disillusionment. Would that we

were honest enough, would that we were confident enough in God's love for us, that we felt free to speak our minds to him when we feel similar sorts of things. The Bible has a strong tradition of lament which encourages us to do so, and even to do so in public worship. It's okay to feel such things, and it's okay to express them. God's big enough; he can take it.

But, although such powerful feelings – grief, despair, anger, disappointment, bewilderment and a range of others – are probably inevitable when, like Jeremiah, we find ourselves in a turmoil of struggle and suffering, and while it's fine and even important that we express them in God's presence, there is something which Jeremiah needs to be able to grasp, and we together with him.

And that is that God is not absent when such suffering comes; he has not abandoned us; he is not having a quick snooze or making merry in the bar while we bear the brunt of such things. He is still there, holding us, sustaining us, loving us, enfolding us in his love, suffering with us in his own way, as any parent suffers the pain of a child. But – and this is the nub of the matter – such suffering is not something we should expect him to snap his fingers and deliver us from. Because, far from being a sign of God having abandoned us, it is precisely the sign of our being enfolded in his care and faithful to his calling. The person who has the word of God, the energy of God, the life of God coursing most fully through them, and who is most effective in channeling, mediating that word, that energy, that life to others in the world in which we live is always going to be the person who, to the extent that he or she sees and feels and tastes the world as God himself sees and feels and tastes it, finds him or herself at cross-purposes with so much that is dark and alien and opposed to God in the world; and being at cross purposes with the world, and being willing to speak and to act in ways that refuse to be compromised by it, will not endear them to those who are happy with (or who have a vested interest in maintaining) the moral, social, institutional, political, economic or religious *status quo*.

That's why God's promise to Jeremiah is not that he will take the suffering away, or mete out suitably gratifying horrible retribution on those who are afflicting him. Neither of those things are true to God's character and purposes, though it's natural enough for Jeremiah (and for us) to desire them. No – God's promise, to Jeremiah, and to us, is that he has never and will never allow them to prevail over us, to overwhelm us, to destroy us. He will be with us, and continue to hold us through it all, and finally, will deliver us and redeem us *through* the pain and suffering, and not otherwise.

It's not an easy message for Jeremiah to hear. And it's not an easy message for us to hear either. But of course our Gospel reading simply drives it home even more emphatically. 'If any want to become my followers', says Jesus, 'let them take up their cross, and follow me'.

As I've said before, it's not an obvious recruiting slogan! And Peter, like Jeremiah, has all the pieces in the wrong place. Following Jesus, he supposes, since Jesus is so obviously on the side of goodness, and so obviously walking a close walk with God, can only be a strategy for success, triumph, exaltation and glory. 'Get behind

me Satan', Jesus retorts – a pretty harsh bit of rhetoric guaranteed to deflate even the most loyal and dedicated student in the class! But Jesus knows that there is no lesson more fundamental, no lesson more vital to learn than this one: aligning yourself with God, allowing his word, his energy, his life, his character, his Spirit to take hold of your life and to renew it, *is not and can never be* – for now, in the world in which we live – a recipe for success, health and wealth, insulation from the tragedies and cruelties of life. On the contrary, because it is bound to put us at cross-purposes with the world, it can only make us far more vulnerable to suffering, to hurt, to loss, to rejection, to death.

'God forbid, Lord! This must never happen!' Peter blurts out. And don't we echo him? Don't we, naturally enough, want to be associated with Jesus, want the spiritual well-being, the joy in his presence, the balm of knowing his Father as our Father, the success of a big, lively congregation – but *without* the blood of the cross? Not just *his* cross (the one we secretly hope will mean we won't *have* to suffer), but *our* cross, the one Jesus tells us to pick up and carry? 'Get behind me Satan!', Jesus says to us, as he says it to Peter. It can never be like that. Suffering the world's pain, suffering in the face of evil, suffering rejection and persecution, suffering as the sin of our common human lot is purged from us through obedience, is not an option, or even an unfortunate accident which from time to time may befall those who follow Jesus.

Jesus doesn't say 'Come on, follow me, and if you're lucky you'll have a happy and comfortable existence; but I should warn you, there are some risks...' That's not what Jesus says. What he says is: 'If you want to follow me, pick up your cross...' Pick it up. Now. Get the feel of it. Feel it heavy, cutting into your shoulders. Don't worry about the splinters. Get used to it. Because you're going to have to carry it from now on, all the way, until we're done. It's going to hurt, but I promise you that it'll never crush you, never become more than you can bear, never cause you to be left behind on the way. It'll never drain the life out of you, because strangely, it's the way (the *only* way) to the life which my Father has purposed and promised for all who will join me on the journey.

We want to follow Jesus, but we don't want to carry the cross. And when the cross comes in one form or another, we chafe under it and baulk at the suggestion that, far from being an unfortunate accident or a temporary oversight or failure on God's part, *this is how it has to be*. This is how it is *bound* to be insofar as we are really walking alongside Jesus, really following him. But each of us has a cross to bear, whether we are carrying it or not. We can't avoid it, finally. Because it is through picking up and enduring the cross (which, in your life and mine, may of course take all manner of different forms at different times), denying the claims of self to a contented and comfortable and successful existence, that 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' lay hold of us and draw us ever more fully into his embrace, and the hold of sin and darkness over our lives is ever more fully broken and burned out.

Our society today has little place for the cross, except as a piece of religious heraldry related to a supposedly Christian past, or as a piece of decorative jewelry (sometimes with and sometimes without 'a little man on it' as one

teenage consumer was heard to observe). But for Christians, the cross is more than a simple mark to distinguish one religious cultural tradition from a variety of others available for consideration; and it's much more than a designer brand or bit of Christian merchandise to adorn tote bags and T-shirts. It's the symbol of what following Jesus is all about, and of the way that all people must travel if they are to enter into the life which God has purposed and promised for his creation. It's the symbol with which those who are baptized are marked at their baptism, the symbol which accompanies priestly blessing, and the symbol that many Christians habitually make at key moments in the liturgy. It's the symbol of putting the concerns of self aside, giving self away for the sake of others, embracing suffering and death – not out of some misplaced masochism, but confident that doing so is the path (and the only path) to the discovery of life in all its fullness.

Let's pray that its meaning and its power may be what infuses and directs and marks our lives and our congregation's life, as together we seek to hear and respond to the call: 'Take up your cross, and follow me'.