

## Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – 2018

During this past week South Africans celebrated the centenary of the birth of Madiba, 'Nelson' Mandela who was born on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1918. It was a significant event made more so by the presence of Barak Obama speaking publicly for the first time since leaving office. Obama was measured, as always, but made some pertinent points about the state of international politics and economics. He began by alluding to the strange and uncertain times in which we live. He spoke about the history of division, between nations, races, colours, politics and creeds. He spoke of course about Mandela's life and his embodiment of unity epitomized in the dismantling of the apartheid regime. He reminded his listeners that when this occurred, when apartheid ended, dictatorships were crumbling, markets were opening up, the technological revolution was happening and many were being lifted from poverty, he then asked his listeners if their hopes at this time had been in vain, had they been naïve, was Mandela's vision possible? And he went to speak about increasing economic disparity, terrorism, state propaganda, climate change, nationalism and authoritarianism – significantly at this time, he spoke of what he called 'strongman politics' and 'shameless leaders.' Using Mandela's vision he laid down a challenge that we work to dismantle division in every area of life, that we recognize objective truth about our common humanity and that the struggle for justice is never truly finished.

Perhaps many of us can remember a time when we thought very little about politics. Whilst yes, it is our duty in a democracy to be politically engaged, there was a time when it wasn't at the forefront of our thinking. I, for one, took certain things for granted; democracy among other things was part of our DNA, but clearly we need to be wary of taking things such as these for granted. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC the peoples of Judah too were secure under the good King Josiah. Josiah closed down all pagan worship sites throughout Israel, centralized worship at the Jerusalem Temple, and attempted to reunite Israel and Judah as an independent monarchy under the rule of the royal house of David. Under Josiah people were confident in the presence of God in the Jerusalem Temple as promised to King David. Their confidence was ill-placed, Josiah's successors led them astray, fostered division and the results were catastrophic.

This was Jeremiah's world. Poor old Jeremiah, I doubt he would have imagined that his name would have become part of our language. '*A person who is pessimistic about the present and foresees a calamitous future*' says one definition. It is a little unfair, he did bring hope and joy as well in his 'Book of Comfort,' but overwhelming Jeremiah spoke of judgement. He was ignored, his prophecies burnt, and ultimately he died in exile. Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture. Jeremiah is not having a go at the agricultural workers of his day. Sheep and shepherds are deeply symbolic in the language of our scriptures. The shepherds that Jeremiah is criticising are those Kings of Judah who consistently failed in their leadership; divide and rule! Rather than gathering they scattered and divided

their people and it was this this that the prophets spoke out against, Jeremiah was preeminent.

I have been reading a little of the life of Dimitri Shostakovich during the week. His name has become synonymous with sadness, depression, misery. But one conductor said of him: *He was too great a musician to be miserable. Sometimes his music depresses you; he embraces you in this sadness – this is Shostakovich. He is cynical, perhaps sarcastic, also quirky and humorous.*

Shostakovich suffered greatly under Stalin's despotic reign. His works criticized, he was denounced as an enemy of the people, members of his family had gone missing, and his mentor was shot. A few years ago I had the pleasure of playing his 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony. It has a dark subversive beginning, our conductor suggested to us that we imagine the secret police are banging at the door; and yet it ends triumphantly in a wonderful dance like movement. Was Shostakovich thumbing his nose at the authorities, was he creating a work that took us on a journey from slavery and oppression to liberation? One commentator wrote this about him: *It is essential that the whole truth about Shostakovich be disclosed - the truth about an artist, who, in a terror-stricken age and with unparalleled force and power, chronicled the Russian tragedy of the 20th century; who, by depicting the gigantic suffering of our people, challenged tyranny, making us see what life was really worth and where and how brightly the flame of humanity's hope still burned.*

Our gospel reading says much by the use of a significant New Testament word. Our translations say that Jesus saw the crowd who were like sheep without a shepherd and 'he had compassion for them.' The Greek word translated 'compassion' is a strong word; for Jesus his deep emotions were engaged, he is sad, he is angry, he is filled with pity for these people. Many of them had been banished, exiled from their towns and villages because of illness or some other impediment which made them unclean. Jesus' goodness seems to radiate from him, there are no words, the healings affected simply by Jesus presence are sign of unity he embodies. He is the shepherd, he gathers, he ends division. He is the antithesis of the divide and rule mentality so favoured by false shepherds – the strongman politicians, the shameless leaders.

Barak Obama at the end of his speech spoke of hope, Shostakovich's 5<sup>th</sup> symphony ends on a note of hope. Even Jeremiah later in his prophecies speaks of hope. Jesus embodies that hope, it is a hope built on unity.

St Paul writes of this in his letter to the Ephesians, I haven't mentioned it because I cannot do it justice. He was speaking of unity between Jews and Gentiles but it has a universal application. *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.*

Our salvation is found in our unity, embodied in Jesus, our hope stands in the Christ of our faith. Amen.