

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost 2020

Jeremiah 28:5-9, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:42-42

Perhaps many of you like me have been reading with some interest the government's plans for the realignment of university courses and the cost of study. The plan is to ensure that graduates are 'job ready!' The argument being largely one of economics. The counter argument says that universities are not just places in which prepare people for work, but places of critical thinking, of research, places of learning and knowledge, places in which prepare for human flourishing. We don't call them 'Humanities' for nothing!

But what good are these folk, these philosophers, ethicists, theologians, these poets, artists and writers...in the famous words of The Castle's Daryl Kerrigan 'tell 'em they're dreamin'!' They are not job ready! No they are not, they don't advise, inform or provide any kind of service. Theirs role is to stimulate, surprise, hint and give nuance. They call on us to think, to see things differently, to re-vision life. What they endeavour to do is make available a world that does not yet exist beyond their own imagination. They want us to entertain the idea of an alternative world. Indeed this is what hope is all about. This is what Jeremiah and Paul are doing, re-visioning life, revealing a world that exists in their imaginations a world revealed to them in lives of vision and prayer.

Engaging with Paul in our modern world is a tricky business. He is of course considered politically incorrect to say the very least. I won't rehearse some of the things he wrote, or that were written in his name. But he has been accused of many things sexism, racism and misogyny to name but three. But I think this is unfair. To read Paul in our modern context is to fail to grasp the radical, counter cultural nature of his teaching. The conservative Pharisee, teacher of the Mosaic Law, student of the great Gamaliel, a Roman citizen indeed (Paul enjoys telling us his credentials) is suddenly swept up in new way of thinking that is, in the words of one of his detractors, 'turning the world upside down.'

Those currently on the barricades of the modern culture wars would struggle immediately today with Paul's references to slavery. But once again a careful, contextually sensitive reading of Paul reveals that rather being public enemy number one, Paul is someone into whose imaginative world we would do well to enter, albeit carefully, wisely.

What both Paul and Jeremiah claimed was that those who came before them, prophets, lawyers etc where in effect traitors of their own tradition. What they both called for was a discontinuity with the past (that sounds familiar) but in such a way that was, paradoxically, continuous or perhaps we should say faithful with the tradition. Perhaps it is best said in a phrase that I have often used: The Church needs to be continually changing to remain the same, ie consistent with the faith that we have inherited, in our context.

Jeremiah was speaking in the context of discontinuity following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, indeed Matthew was doing much the same following the rampaging Romans. Paul was trying create communities that stood in discontinuity to those around them in the wider society but all were continuous with the great traditions of the past as they now read them in their new contexts. So how might we read this today in our time when there are radical calls for discontinuity with the past? When many are 'calling out' historical characters for their failures, when 'cancel culture' has found its way into our vernacular.

First, I think we can be sympathetic with the today's activists calling for a discontinuity with the past, the prophets and Paul did much the same. But what *they* did was not just tear down but imagine a new way, a way consistent with and obedient to the call of God. Jeremiah warns that the prophets of doom are not the full story, Paul in a different way says almost as much, you are no longer condemned by your past. Theirs was and is a call to reimagine the world, to use our imaginations and to re capture something of the continuity of God's call.

Today's activists, are nothing new. What we are experiencing is a moment in history not the erasing of it. Social history is something that we live in. It is the story of our striving to live together and that is crucial. Consistently the prophets and other Biblical writers were calling their readers and listeners away from an ideology that remains pervasive in our time - the ideology of autonomy.

In the passage from Romans that we heard this morning – a difficult one, Paul mentions sin about 10 times! I get a sense that sin in this context is the ideology of autonomy. Paul uses the slavery metaphor to remind us that whilst we are no longer slaves, we are obedient to a new way, a way that is consistent, continuous, with God's call to all people. What Paul and the prophets were saying, and this is what our modern culture warriors need to hear, is that the freedom they desire this ideology of autonomy always leads to a dead end – literally for Paul. The ideology of autonomy that says 'it's all about me,' 'it's all about now' an ideology denies our connectedness with each other *and* with the past *and* with the future; it is an ideology which denies a spirituality through which, as Jesus reminds us in today's gospel, we are connected to him and to each other, to the pastoral tradition that has sustained us and through that to the God who calls us.

It is a call to reimagine our world. Not just to tear down, but to re-envision the past in the context of our time. Our tradition – listen to the words of institution at the altar, says there is possibility in memory, which shapes our present and leads us into the future. It is the imaginative landscape of our artists, poets, ethicists, theologians, philosophers and writers, yes they are dreamin!' Long may they do so and continue to show us this brave new world into which we are being called. Amen.