Sermon 26th October 2025

Last Sunday after Trinity. Also kept as Bible Sunday

Jeremiah 14: 7-10, 19 - end

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18: 9-14

O Lord, take my lips and speak through them;
Take our minds and think through them;
Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for You. Amen.

Who do we know of who in in the habit of exalting himself?

Wig, Donald Trump face

"God I thank you that I am not like other people: weak, fakes, losers, or even like this vicar. I have sorted out peace for the Middle East after 3,000 years; I have given Bibi enormous weapons, and he has used them well…"

Remove wig.

3,000 years. Where does Donald Trump get that figure from? Presumably, he is referring to the Bible.

Today, the last Sunday in the season of Trinity, we keep as Bible Sunday. It invites us to consider the whole sweep of the Bible, so rather than focussing in on particular passages, we will pan out and take in a bigger panorama.

3,000 years ago in the hill country of Canaan there were two small kingdoms: Israel in the northern area and Judah in the south. This era is known in the Bible as the time of the monarchy when each kingdom had its own king, but the language spoken in both was a form of ancient Hebrew[i]. Around about 722 BC Israel, and its capital Samaria, was besieged by the Assyrians and disappeared from the map. Judah with its capital Jerusalem survived another 150 years until it was invaded by the ascendant Babylonian empire, with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Judah is more closely associated with the House of David. With both of these invasions, the political and religious elites were taken into exile, while the ordinary people continued to be 'vinedressers and tillers of the soil', as it says in 2 Kings.[ii] The descendants of some of the Babylonian exiles returned to the land when the Persians took over in 538 BC, and the second temple was built in Jerusalem.

Biblical theologians, using detailed and careful analysis, tell us that the composition of the documents that make up what we call the Old Testament started during this era of the monarchies. It has long been recognised that there are different narrative strands in the

Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Bible. Four strands have been identified, designated by the letters JED and P. The J strand is given its name because it refers to God by the name of Yahweh (or Jehovah). It probably originates from Judah. It has been concluded that the creation story in Genesis ch 2 is from the J strand as God is referred to as Yahweh, which is translated into English as 'the Lord God'. So in Genesis ch 2:7 we are told 'The Lord God formed adam from the dust of the ground'.

The E strand refers to God as Elohim, and probably originates from the northern kingdom. E doesn't have a Creation narrative, but starts with the story of Abraham. D is the Book of Deuteronomy, which takes the form of a long address by Moses to the people before his death on Mt Nebo. The latest of the strands is P, an abbreviation of 'Priestly'. When the P material is isolated, it can be seen that there is a lot of emphasis on the laws and regulations of worship.

None of these documents are eye-witness accounts with the earliest, J and E, being written several hundred years after the events they purport to describe. It is, however, very likely they draw on earlier material, especially stories passed down orally, as we are talking about a pre-literate era. The evidence suggests that the D document was written during the exile in Babylon and that it is the first in a series that also includes Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. P originates from the post-exilic period when the second temple was being built in Jerusalem, which is why it concentrates on the regulations of the cult. The P strand contains its own material – such as the Creation account of Genesis 1, but with P we also seem to have the final editing which brings together all the four documents to form the Pentateuch. In its final form the Pentateuch is removed from the events it describes by many centuries, and by many intervening circumstances, so the documents that make up the Pentateuch are regarded as legends and myths of faith, possibly peppered with historical elements passed down by word of mouth.

I hope it isn't troubling for any of you to hear the stories of the patriarchs, the exodus and the conquest being described as myths. The archaeologist and biblical scholar William Dever discusses 'myth' in his book on the early Israelites, saying:

> 'Calling something a myth does not mean that it is without any historical basis whatsoever, much less false or untrue. A myth is rather supra-historical, true on a higher and more profound level.'[iii]

I think very few people would abandon enjoying the plays which Shakespeare set in the past because they are historically inaccurate. We understand that the plays are anachronistic. They are exploring issues from Shakespeare's own time in the form of a drama set in the past. So in Julius Caesar, we may see Elizabethan concerns about who might succeed the queen and the danger of civil war, expressed in a drama set in ancient Rome.

As we enter into the drama, involving ourselves in the story, we become engrossed in the themes of ambition, betrayal, manipulation and friendship. The drama becomes a vehicle for a deep exploration of these questions for Shakespeare's audience, leaving behind any worries about historical accuracy. The myths and legends of the ancient biblical past woven

together by the different authors function in the same way giving us a huge, magnificent canvas of theological concepts as we see the development from tribal polytheism to universal monotheism; from the covenant written on tablets of stone to the covenant written on our hearts; from sacrifice to mercy. These themes come down the generations and still engross us today. It is both humbling and exalting that they are accessed through story.

Similar methods are also applied to the study of the New Testament, when questions are asked about what might be eye-witness accounts, and what might be the theological reflection of the authors. The parable in our reading today strikes me as having all the marks of the original teaching of Jesus, with its description as Jesus is often seen to do, of a common activity which he uses to illustrate a point. Here we have one that Jesus frequently seems to have made, that 'many who are first will be last and the last first', as Mark puts it[iv].

The point that the biblical theologians have recognised is that the context of the writers is as important as the context of the event being described, and the writing is an interweaving of the two. In reading Julius Caesar, we learn about Elizabethan England. In reading the Pentateuch, we learn about the time of the Babylonian exile and the post-exilic period. In reading the New Testament, we learn about the life and teaching of Jesus as well as the time of the early Church.

There is another important layer, though, and that is how we, the readers of today, perceive the verses we are reading, how they speak to us about our times, and our faith. Over the centuries our theology has changed. A big watershed for the Church is the time of the Reformation as the Bible became available in the languages the readers spoke.

Let's have a look at the layers in today's reading from Jeremiah, a prophet who was active in the last days of the kingdom of Judah. Theologians from our era have identified three strands to the Book of Jeremiah: poetic oracles, historical narratives, and prose sermons. The prose and the poems differ from each other in style, language and theology. This evidence suggests that the book we now know as Jeremiah is layered, some, probably the poetry from the prophet himself, and some from writers, a bit later, during the exile. In fact it is strongly suggestive, from their style and language, that the historical commentary and the prose sermons originate from the Deuteronomists. Our reading today is mainly prophetic poetry with a touch of Deuteronomic commentary. It is a lament in time of drought, famine and defeat. The verses immediately before our reading describe how the produce of the land is failing because there is no rain. Jeremiah grieves the sins of Judah and cries for God to remember the covenant and give the people hope.

For us today, reading those words about the lack of rain which leads to lack of fodder for the animals, we can't help but read them in the light of the crisis of climate change and diminishing biodiversity. 'Can any of the false gods give rain?' laments Jeremiah. We might ask the same question of our false gods of Money, Power and Security.

In our reading, Jeremiah addresses God as 'O hope of Israel', yet the northern country of Israel had disappeared more than a century before. What seems clear throughout the Bible is that the primary meaning of the name Israel is the people, not a country. The reading we

had last week where Jacob, after struggling with the stranger, is given the name of Israel is mythological material from the J strand of documents, with possible additions from E. Whatever we make of that, the point is that the name Israel refers to the people, the descendants of Jacob, not an area of land. The name is found this way, in numerous places throughout the Old and New Testaments. In Luke chapter 7, Jesus heals the Roman centurion's slave, and then announces

> 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith'

This announcement is not referring to a country, there was no such country. He is referring to the Jewish people.

There is a lot of evidence throughout the Biblical literature that the Jewish people – the returnees from Babylon, who developed the Torah and second temple worship, adopted the name Israel to refer to themselves as God's people, as opposed to the polytheistic Canaanites. It is also from that time they began to be known as Jews. Not all the Jews returned to Judah, some remained in Babylon. This was the beginning of the spread of Judaism, by conversion, around the Mediterranean and then on into Europe, and the development of synagogue worship. The new Christian Church in the New Testament may be seen as following in the footprints of this spread, as we see Paul, in Acts of the Apostles, calling in on the local synagogue when he was new to a place. Of course in medieval Europe, anti-semitism raised its ugly head, but not, we might note, in the eastern Islamic countries.

In our day Israel is again, after three millennia, the name of a country, established, in 1948. We can see this as a response to anti-semitism. For us children of this age, it can mean that we read verses such as the one from Luke 7, anachronistically as though Israel was a country that Jesus lived in. This is historically inaccurate, Jesus lived in Roman-occupied Galilee and Judaea, and I think, because of the catastrophe the establishment of modern Israel has meant for the indigenous people of the land, 'the vinedressers and tillers of the soil, who are completely innocent of anti-semitism, this is an anachronism we need to avoid. And I'm not at all sure that Donald Trump is sufficiently aware of this. I think he needs to reflect on the history of the last century for how we got to the present situation in the Middle East.

In our reading from 2 Timothy, we see mention of 'that great Day'. Theologians have little doubt that the first Christians were expecting the end of the world, the great Day, to arrive very shortly after the resurrection. In the pages of the New Testament we see that context for the writers who struggled with the fact it hadn't happened, and we can identify different approaches to this problem. The Book of Revelation is a startling read that deals with the end times. To begin to understand it, I think we have to look at the context of the time in which it was written, and of other apocalyptic writing. In interpreting it for today, we have to beware of false streams that lead into dangerous waters. The last chapters of Revelation are beautiful, though, with the trees of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. How inspiring and evocative it is that the Biblical documents start and end with the image of the tree of life[v] We end with universal justice and peace, which blossom from the root of sacrificial love.

We have covered a lot of ground this morning. Let us return to the parable in Luke, and think this time about the tax collector, who standing far off was beating his breast and saying 'God be merciful to me a sinner'. In the same tradition as seen in Jeremiah, his prayer is lament. Lament today spreads far and wide for the people suffering from famine due to war and climate change, for the genocide of the indigenous Palestinians; for the Ukrainians and the Sudanese, for nationalism, racism and anti-semitism, for the power of the arms industry, for those impacted by the decision of our bishops to impede God's calling to the priesthood of married gay people, for those suffering from personal grief and ill-health, let us, conscious of our own sin, humbly join in hope, and prayer with the tax collector to say:

God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

[i] Sand, Shlomo *The Invention of the Jewish People*: Verso 2009 p.121
[ii] 2 Kings 25:12.
[iii] Dever, William G. *Who were the early Israelites and where did they come from?* William B Eeardmans: 2003 p. 232
[iv] Mark 10:31
[v] Genesis 2:9, and Revelation 22:2