

Wheatley United Reformed Church  
Sunday 20 October 2013 (Year C) – One World Week  
Genesis 32.22-32; II Tim.3.14-4.5; Luke 18.1-8

If you're a geologist you can read the history of the earth from layers of exposed rock: the massive movements of the tectonic plates, the earthquakes and tsunamis, the volcanic upheavals, and the movement of ice sheets. If you're an archaeologist you can read human history from the layers of settlement you uncover: the foundations of buildings, the food our ancestors ate, tell-tale signs of times of prosperity and disaster. When it comes to reading the Bible, some people assume that there's only ever been one layer of meaning, the literal. But that is both dishonest and lazy. To begin with, it wasn't written in the language we use. We depend on translations from ancient tongues, but they work very differently from our own and words only partly correspond in meaning between them. If you've ever wondered why some words are in italics in the King James Bible, that's because they are absent from the original Hebrew or Greek and the translators had to add them in order to make sense. We have an interesting example of the problem this morning. II Timothy 3.16 reads 'All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching' and so on. Or does it? The Greek doesn't include the verb 'to be', so it could just as well mean 'All Scripture inspired by God is useful...'. Then we have to remember that when those words were written Paul was referring to the Old Testament, since the New did not exist as such. And that the Greek words translated 'Scripture' is a word which has the wider meaning of 'writing'.

But that's only one layer which needs to be uncovered. There's a further layer, that of interpretation. Supposing we understand the words: what do they mean and what may they be saying to us? In its Statement of the Nature, Faith and Order the United Reformed Church acknowledges that 'the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of God's people'. Sometimes the Bible is clear and straightforward, as when Jesus commands us to love our enemies. Then the difficulty comes in putting it into practice, because it goes against the grain; and anyway, what does it involve when it comes to those who are violent or unjust? At other times its

voice is harder for us to hear, especially when it appears to legitimise killing them. There was an extraordinary letter in *Reform* recently from a correspondent who appeared to be justifying the genocide of the Canaanites by the Israelites who entered the Promised Land, on the grounds that they were very wicked. I must confess to having been astonished and appalled that anyone at the start of the twenty-first century, with all that the past has taught us, could possibly defend such a view on biblical grounds. That is a dangerous perversion, however much Christians in the past and some Muslims now claim that their sacred books permit them to kill non-believers.

Last week Richard Bainbridge mentioned a hymn which we used to sing but which didn't make it into our hymn books. We're going to sing it now, because it makes a very important point, that the authority of Scripture is not that of a dictator or a tyrant but comes from a living relationship with the risen Christ and through the working of the Holy Spirit. Even when the meaning seems plain, but especially when it is not, we are to wrestle with them as Jacob wrestled with the mysterious stranger, if they are to be our guide. Otherwise, we risk imposing our own narrow vision on Scripture and distorting or even betraying its sense. We need to be open, not closed; humility, not arrogance, should be our attitude: the ability to admit that there is much we do not know and cannot fathom. I think this hymn provides a fine commentary on what we mean by the authority of Scripture. It is not a straitjacket which locks us into dogmatic attitudes; it is a journey to which God calls us; an encounter in which God meets us; a light by which he guides us through all the dark places; a word with the power to break through locked doors down doors and to lift us up. The reference to sphere music comes from the ancient philosophers, who believed that the spheres of the planets created a wonderful harmony as they circled round. We may not think like that, but we can still wonder at the mathematical beauty of their orbits and the vast reaches of space.

---

Today Jesus tells us a parable which, as usual, begins with a scene from everyday life. He wants to tell us something about prayer, and he comes at it from an unexpected angle. When you imagine the judge, don't think courthouses and wigs. The judge sat

in a public place, often at the city gates, and people came to him with their complaints. And don't think equality under the law. He is a man; he is rich and he is powerful. She is a woman and a widow, poor and powerless and with no one to protect her. He becomes increasingly irritated by the way in which she pesters him. But she has no other weapon in her armoury; no husband to take up her case and probably no money with which to bribe the judge. Jesus tells us that this judge neither feared God nor respected people. In other words, he isn't concerned with things like the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself or to care for the widows and the orphans in society. He looks down on all these little people who keep bothering him with their petty concerns when he could be at home putting his feet up or counting his money. But little by little, she wears him down, until it dawns on him that he would have a much easier life if he simply found favour in her favour.

Jesus doesn't mean to suggest that God is the unjust judge and we are the widow, even if prayer often feels as if we are battering on the door of heaven asking for peace and justice to be restored to the earth while terrorists murder innocent people and grinding poverty and hunger swallow up victims every moment of the day and night. No: his point is more subtle. We all know what it's like to be pestered, whether it's the children wanting an ice cream or a difficult friend or relative who has latched on to us. We know that at some point we may give in, if only for the quiet life. In the end the judge does the right thing for all the wrong reasons. I can recognise that in myself and maybe you can. So if even we, selfish and flawed as we are, are capable of answering pleas for help, how much more is God, who is the very essence of love, a love so pure and powerful that it terrifies us.

Prayer for the needs of the world is a priestly vocation which belongs to all believers. We offer it Sunday by Sunday, even day by day, but if you're like me you may find yourself wondering what the point is when no answer comes. No doubt the widow felt the same; yet she did not give up. If God wills justice and peace for all and we pray for it, why does the world continue to see such terrible denials of both? That's a big question and I certainly can't answer it in five minutes flat. But justice and peace are not abstractions; they relate to real situations, from divisions within the family to civil wars and murderous regimes. We can, for example, pray in general terms for

justice and peace for all the inhabitants of Syrian, but the conflict has so many sides to it that it is well nigh impossible to imagine what this might mean. You could have peace, but imposed by the continuing tyranny of Assad. Is that better than the complete breakdown of civil society, or not? When it comes to the specifics, it is for wisdom and understanding that we need to pray, as well as for our enemies and persecutors – that their hearts will be turned away from evil. In a diary entry for 3 January 1954 the novelist Evelyn Waugh wrote: ‘Church again. My prayer is now only “Here I am again. Show me what to do. Help me to do it”.’ That’s not a bad place to start learning how to be open to God. For if prayer is simply a form of words it is in danger of becoming hypocrisy: ‘I’ve prayed, so I’ve done my duty.’ Prayer is a way of becoming completely open to the will of God, and involves listening than asking. But all the great teachers of prayer tell us that to be truly receptive to the divine is a long and hard path, because there is so much in us that is in the way. There’s always the danger is that we think we know what God’s will is, before we have cleared out the junk for his voice to be heard. For true prayer never leaves us where we were before. The unjust judge left his comfort zone, if only for a moment; the widow received the help she needed. Just as the word of God comes to us through the Scriptures when we wrestle with them, so the encounter with divine mystery leaves us wounded and we bear the marks of it for the rest of our lives. Like Jacob, we limp towards heaven; like Evelyn Waugh, we come to God time and time again, asking for the grace to clear our vision and strengthen our resolve to be the ministers of Christ.