

Wheatley United Reformed Church  
Sunday 18 August 2013 - Year C  
Jeremiah 23.23-29; Psalm 82; Hebr.11.29-12.2; Luke 12.49-56

‘Father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother’. Those words of Jesus, recorded by Luke, have all too deadly a ring to them when tyrants rule by terror or when civil society breaks down. They are probably coming true, even as we sit here, in Egypt. Do we like this Jesus, the one who speaks to us in such stark terms of betrayals that traduce all that we hold dear? Don’t we much prefer the Jesus who embodies wisdom and love, even the Jesus who tears up our entrenched opinions and makes us look again at our patterns of behaviour? Of course we do. This dark Jesus, with his frightening predictions, himself betrayed by a friend, is not at all to our taste. Listen, then:

‘They also sent here a boy of fourteen who was distantly related to Stalin...For days the boy went on raving against his father and mother as renegades, traitors to the working class and enemies of the people. He used a formula which had been instilled in him during his very careful upbringing: “Stalin is my father and I do not need another one”, and he kept referring to the hero of all the Soviet schoolbooks, Pavlik Morozov, who had managed to denounce his parents in time... His aunt and governess were forced to listen in silence - they knew what the boy would do if they dared breathe a word’. This is from Nadezhda Mandelstam’s *Hope Against Hope*, first published in 1970, her searing account of the Stalinist terror of the late 1930s, which claimed the life of her husband, the poet Osip Mandelstam, along with hundreds of thousands of others. She writes of how networks of informers were everywhere, and of how there was nothing out of the ordinary about denouncing a neighbour to get his apartment or his job. Nearer to home, just over the border in Buckinghamshire, but much further away in time, I think about the Verney family during the English Civil War, which set father and one son against the other son. It’s long ago now, but we should remember that we too have been where Iraq and Syria are now, and that when it comes to sheer survival none of us knows what terrible betrayals we might commit. We have been blessed to live, perhaps for the first time in our history, in times of

peace since the Second World War. Sure, we have fought and are still fighting wars, far away; sure, we have the threat of terror to contend with. But we are privileged in ways our grandparents and those before them were not. We see now, all too clearly, what was not so easy to see at the time, with the carnage of the Great War so fresh in people's minds, that the cruel and twisted ideology of National Socialism had to be stopped. But I know, in the very fibre of my being, that the civilisation we pride ourselves on, our British tolerance and sense of fair play, imperfect and flawed though it is, is but a thin veneer which is always in danger of cracking open from within as well as without. Do we beg to differ when people start heaping the blame for all their problems on one scapegoat or another? Supposing the nastier elements in our society were to gain some purchase on our political establishment; supposing some general breakdown in the economy or in law and order or both were to happen and a political party which promised to fix everything and - by the way - remove basic rights from certain groups of people whom they blamed for all the ills, would we have the courage to protest, to resist? I hope so; but I don't know if I would and I can't speak for you.

I don't think Jesus was trying to frighten people, but to warn them and to help them to understand the times in which they were living. The starkness of the warning may owe something to the teaching techniques of his age, which sometimes put things in extreme terms to shock listeners into getting the point. But, as we have seen, his words can prove all too tragically true. In any case, terrible times were not far ahead for the Roman province of Palestine; the Jewish community would be torn apart and those who survived would become exiles all over again. And he does well to warn us now, that there is darkness and evil in the human heart and we need to be vigilant if we are to resist it. The time for vigilance is never more urgent than when laws begin to be proposed which treat some citizens less fairly than others. Public opinion can be easily misled. In a poll conducted last May and reported on the YouGov website, when people were asked what proportion of welfare claimants was defrauding the system, the answer was a whopping 24%. The actual figure is 0.7%. When they were asked what the proportion of Muslims in Britain was, they said 25%. The answer is

5%. When asked what proportion of the population was born outside the UK, they answered 31%, when it's 13%. When asked what the percentage of single parents in the population was, they said 28%; it's actually 3%. I'm not trying to be political, simply pointing out that in this snapshot of public attitudes towards issues of the day people vastly overestimate the scale of welfare fraud and immigration. And they are encouraged to do so by certain elements in the popular press, which delight in regaling us with the latest tale of scroungers, teenage pregnancies and floods of aliens trying to sponge off the system. All these things happen, but not to the extent people are being encouraged to believe. You may recall that the Free Churches captured the headlines at the end of March, just before the benefits cap came in, with a report which strongly and factually rebutted the underlying assumption often made that all claimants are lazy, because the changes will hit the poorest working people the hardest.

Do these reflections belong in a sermon? Well, Jesus was not shy about attacking injustice or the stereotyping of individuals, any more than the prophet Jeremiah had been centuries earlier when he insisted publicly that all the spin-doctors telling people that everything was going to be fine were wrong, because disaster was just around the corner. And what I am trying to say is this. We have to care about the issues which represent a threat to the relative peace and stability we have tried to build in these islands since the last War. We have to pray, as Jesus taught us, not to be led into temptation, and that includes the temptation to join in the chorus of condemnation when it scapegoats certain communities within society. We have to pray to be delivered from evil, or as some modern translations more accurately have it, from the time of trial or testing; from the fragmentation of society into mutually antagonistic tribes; from the breakdown of trust; from the tyrant who promises the quick fix; from the descent into suspicion and self-preservation at any cost. From 'Father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother'. Because that is the way of destruction and we - so we claim - are disciples of the one who called the peacemakers, the poor and the persecuted blessed. That is why the way of Christ calls us to root out in us all those prejudices we cherish, all that capacity

we have for aggression and for blaming others; and because we are not very good at doing that by our own efforts, that is why we should pray for his grace to begin and complete the process.

Thank God there have always been witnesses to the power of this grace to transform even the most hideous situations. Here is one of them, the Russian poet Irina Ratushinskaya, sent to a labour camp for her faith in the last period of Soviet repression, writing in her memoir *Grey is the Colour of Hope*, after her release in 1987: ‘Thank you, O Lord, that it fell to my lot to endure the rigours of prison transports, to hide poetry and books from the KGB, to languish in punishment cells and to starve. Only when I entered into open combat did I realise how much help I received from almost everyone I encountered...So many different hands - young and old - slipped us bread when we were exhausted by hunger, so many different eyes smiled at us - grey, brown, blue....And in the wondrous realisation that they were on our side, and not on the side of our tormentors, I shed my youthful pride, and the arrogance which might have destroyed my soul melted away....There are not many dedicated sadists among the gaolers, after all: the majority of them are none too bright but cunning functionaries, who are only too glad to leave certain orders unfulfilled. Somewhere at the back of their uniform-encased hearts there are stirrings of shame, and conscience, and compassion - all these qualities which will be the salvation of my people one day.’ And, one might add, of any such system which imprisons, tortures and tries to silence the word of truth.

In her account, it was not ‘Father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother’; it was prisoner for and with prisoner; even, sometimes, prison guard not against prisoner. It is grace which enabled the writer to understand this, in circumstances which might have destroyed any one of us. None of us, I hope and pray, will ever have to suffer in such a way. But it is our Christian duty to be alert to the danger signals and so deeply and thoroughly to ground ourselves in the love of Christ that we become the bearers of his words and his deeds wherever the darkness threatens or the tide of hatred rises. After all, he was no stranger to betrayal;

to the scourge, the nails, the spear, the tomb. Yet despite our best efforts to silence him, he stands among us still, with his invitation to be broken and remade by love; to learn from the broken bread and the outpoured wine to be nourished by his grace and find healing for the wounded soul.