

Sermon for USPG Sunday 18 July 2021 7th Sunday after Trinity

Texts: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:11-end; Mark 6: 30-34, 53-end

How do we dare to hope?

When we look around the world today, hope can seem pretty thin on the ground. Despite all the advances in the 20th and early years of our current century, we see countries and communities deeply divided by competition for land and resources, ethnic divisions and stark economic inequalities. We see many excluded from the opportunity to live a full life because of their gender, their ethnicity or their poverty or disability. We see the terrible environmental degradation we have inflicted on the planet and the consequences which we are now having to live through as we face climate change and the implications of this.

Christian communities are not immune from this pain and suffering. Many Christians and other people of faith are still persecuted for their beliefs in a number of parts of the world today. Within a number of Christian communities themselves, instead of love and harmony, in many situations, we find deep rooted conflicts. What is worst of all, we have seen betrayals by some who were trusted to be leaders of those communities but who have abused those entrusted to their care and left lasting damage on their lives.

And if this wasn't enough, the last 16 months, we have seen the impact of Covid-19 which has caused, and continues to cause so much devastation. No wonder we are reeling.

The USPG conference which will start next week is called 'For such a time of this' and this title seems particularly apt. For as the conference description reads, 'We have not witnessed 'such a time as this' on a global scale of pandemic, ecological crisis and racial divisions'.

Our Bible readings today remind us however that though we face immense problems, this is not unique to us in the 21st century. The prophet Jeremiah preaching just before the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army, speaks of the horrors of 'false shepherds' amongst his own people. These are the people who should have spoken the truth to power, to declared the situation as it was, to have spoken for, protected and guarded the people. Instead, they have quite cynically neglected them, allowed them to stray and to be scattered and in doing so, have made them utterly vulnerable.

In his letter to the Ephesians, St Paul vividly describes the extent of the gulf, the division between Jew and Gentile before the coming of Christ. It is a stark reminder of the apparently insurmountable barriers which can exist between groups of people and how, in that context, it feels utterly unconceivable that any way can be found to bring those barriers down and to live together in unity.

And our Gospel reading today starts in the cold aftermath of the murder of John the Baptist in Herod's jail. We can imagine the disciples' mental state as they came to take away his mutilated body, for this was a stark reminder of what happens when prophets speak the truth to those in power. They must have experienced the shock and grief of seeing just what happens when those who wield power, allow their fears, desires and ambitions to

dominate their actions. And for Jesus, if not for his disciples as well, he must have seen very clearly that what had happened to John that previous night, was very likely to be the path that he too would have to take.

So today I want to ask the question. “How do we, as Christians and as those engaged in global mission dare to hope in this context? If we do so, are we not guilty of peddling false optimism, like those false prophets and shepherds of whom Jeremiah was so critical? How can we, as Christians, given what we know of our human nature, dare to hope, let alone try to live it out in our lives?

I believe we can dare to hope for three reasons. First of all, because, praise the Lord, it does not rest on us but on God. We know that God is the true shepherd. As Jeremiah has proclaimed today, he is the one who will gather up his sheep wherever they have been scattered and strayed and will bring them back to safety. What is more, God promises that he will raise up rulers who will shepherd his people as he raised up King David. The shepherd-nature of God lies at the heart of the Trinity. Jesus identifies himself as ‘the Good Shepherd’, the one who will care for his sheep and will leave no stone unturned to bring back the lost and those have wandered. And through the Holy Spirit, we are guided and helped by God, the Good Shepherd in our daily lives.

We can have grounds for hope because Jesus is the reconciler even in the face of human differences which appear to be irreconcilable. He has done this through reconciling Jew and Gentile to God on the Cross. Through his sacrificial death, he has put to death that hostility which existed between them and has created a new humanity rooted on peace, not conflict.

And we can have grounds for hope because we know that God always strives to bring healing and new hope to His people. He never tires or grows weary with this – as the psalmist writes, “He who watches over Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep”. We see this in the Gospel reading today. Jesus, recognising his disciples’ grief and exhaustion following John the Baptist’s death, suggests that they come away to a quiet place for a while to recover. Yet, the crowd spot them as they climb into their boat and hasten ahead to meet them in the place to which they are going.

As they disembark on the other shore, Jesus is filled with compassion as he sees the crowd whom he describes as “sheep without a shepherd”. Despite his weariness and that of his disciples, his instinctive desire to nurture and to heal come to the fore. We’re told that he taught the crowd many things and then ministered to the sick and those who came to him throughout that region. It reminds us that God doesn’t give up on us, even if many times we fail and give up on Him. It also tells us that God’s desire is always for our healing, for new life and hope. And this gives particular hope to our world today.

So as Christians, members of the Body of Christ on earth, we are called to take part in the global mission of the church, we are called today proclaim God’s message of hope, reconciliation and healing. Despite all the problems we see in the world today, we draw strength and new vision from our Bible readings today that this is indeed *God’s* world. He will shepherd and raise up true shepherds for this people, He has and will continue to bring reconciliation through Christ and He will help us to work through the untold damage we

have done, to find a new and more sustainable way forward, even as we continue to grapple with the current pandemic.

But this is where we come in as His hands and feet on earth. We must be living witnesses to that hope, we must be what St Paul describes ‘living letters’ so that people can look at us, and as they hear the message we proclaim and see the way we live our lives, they encounter the love of God. I believe that the work and witness of USPG as an Anglican Mission Agency can help and inspire us both for our individual witness and that of the churches which we represent.

Let me give you three examples of this. First of all, in the role of leadership. USPG has always been deeply committed to helping and encouraging the formation of those who will be shepherds in the churches and communities from which they come. Some of the ways USPG has helped with this has been through education and training, and also with schemes such as the episcopal accompaniment programme which has helped bishops to learn from and to encourage one another. They’ve helped to remind us that those called to leadership in Christ’s church are called to follow, in humility, the path of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and how we are called in grace to learn from one another.

Second, in the area of reconciliation. One of the most exciting developments in USPG in recently years, has been in the increasing work of encouraging links and initiatives between the Provinces of the Anglican Communion to build up understanding and share skills. USPG has also had to face the darker side of its own history as a Mission Agency which benefited directly from slave labour in the Caribbean. Part of the task of reconciliation has been and continues coming to terms with this and seeing what the reconciling love of God means in building a new future together, recognising with penitence the sins of the past, but then building on new and profound new relationships based on respect and trust for the way ahead

Third, USPG witnesses to the fact that God never gives up on us and is constantly inviting us to find a new future together. We’ve seen a number of examples of this including the commitment to helping transform the lives of refugees at Calais in France and also in Greece. USPG has worked with partners to overcome gender discrimination so that girls can share with boys in access to good education and recent environmental projects it has supported, have helped to counter the environmental devastation which we have caused, including teaching and encouraging school children in South India to take part in projects to promote environmental sustainability in the schools and communities.

How do we dare to hope? We dare because our God of hope who calls us today to witness to that hope in our troubled world today. We thank God for all that USPG is doing to share this hope. And let’s pray today that we too, by our witness, may bring to live out that hope as a witness to others and to God’s praise and glory.

Amen

The Revd Canon Dr Daphne Green