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St Aidan's, Lansdowne
15 August 2010

Jer 20:7-13 – The readings are taken from the Good News Bible
Heb 12:1-2,12-17
Lk 12:49-56

May I speak in the name of God, who calls us to run with determination the race he sets before us.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, dear people of St Aidan's, it is a great joy to be with you this morning. Thank you for your invitation.

I am particularly glad to be here while Fr Louis Bank is still with you, so that I can – in the presence of you all, and on behalf of you all, I am sure – thank him for his dedication in serving you through the long interregnum.

We wish him, in a few week's time, a return to a restful and refreshing retirement!

I also assure you of my prayers as you prepare for Fr Deon Faro, his wife Bonita, and their family to join you.

We are believing and trusting that God will sustain you all in the new chapter of life that lies ahead for St Aidan's.

Yet we have no guarantees about precisely what God has in mind for us, when we say yes to his leading.

Often things turn out very differently from what we expect.

Fr Louis, when you agreed to serve here for the interregnum, I am sure you didn't anticipate all that has happened – or, indeed, how long you would be here!

When I became Archbishop I had no idea of some of the matters which would cross my desk.

Some have been wonderful surprises – some have presented difficult challenges, and required painful decisions.

Indeed, if I *had* known, perhaps I would have thought twice about being nominated!

Yet this is the way life always has been, even for those who put their trust in God.

This is what we heard from Jeremiah this morning.

‘Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived!’

Poor Jeremiah feels that God has cheated him!

For Jeremiah faithfully responded to God’s call that he should be God’s prophet.

He gave up whatever other plans he might have had, and dedicated his life to living with integrity and holiness; and proclaiming in word and action the prophetic words of the Lord.

Now he finds that no-one is listening, and, worse, God seems to be standing by, doing nothing, while he is beaten up, put in chains, imprisoned and threatened with death.

This wasn’t what Jeremiah thought he was signing up to, when he said Yes to the call of God!

‘You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced!’ is the way the Jerusalem Bible translates the verse.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has spoken of God as ‘the persistent seducer’.

God does not force himself upon us, but he is always speaking words of love, and always asking that bit more from us!

In the same way, Jesus keeps saying ‘Follow me’ but he rarely tells us where he is going to lead us!

We must beware of preachers who say ‘If you give your life to Jesus, then you are guaranteed riches and healing and happiness.’

Today’s lessons tell us that life is far more complicated than that. And we only have to look at the world around, to see that this is indeed so.

It is not the case that good people automatically live happily ever after while bad people suffer.

Indeed, too often it seems as if the greedy and ruthless are the ones who get the benefits!

What does the Christian faith have to tell us, then, about the struggles of life, and God's place in our battling?

What does he have to say to us in the month of Compassion: as we remember the needs of others, and also face honestly the challenges – even the pains and sadnesses, the sufferings and the disappointments – of our own lives?

What are we to do and say, how are we to pray, if we feel that God has let us down?

Well, like Jeremiah, we should dare to be honest before God – and even use Jeremiah's words if they help us express ourselves.

'You tricked me Lord, and I was really fooled!' is how the Contemporary English Version of the Bible puts it.

The Psalms also give us the words we need, and permission to use them, when we are battling.

'Why do you stand far off, O lord, why do you hide your face in time of need?' – said the opening verse of today's set Psalm, Psalm 10.

Similarly, Jesus on the cross quoted Psalm 22 when he said 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Does this mean that God is not to be trusted?

Not at all! In fact, quite the opposite!

Because what Jeremiah found, what the Psalmist found – and what we can also find – is that when we are open before God about our problems, then we open ourselves up to receive whatever grace he has in store for us.

Talking with God about what challenges us, helps us hear God's answer.

If we pretend that everything is fine, that we are so-called 'successful Christians', and refuse to admit our difficulties, how can God help us deal with them?

In this way, Jeremiah found himself recognising that God was bigger than his troubles.

'You, Lord, are on my side, strong and mighty' he said.

'Almighty God, you test people justly' he acknowledged, 'you know what is on their hearts and minds.'

Jeremiah realised that God works to strengthen and refine our faith through tough times – and he does so in ways that take full account of the person that we are, dealing with us as unique individuals.

I am sure that many of us would say we have grown as Christians through hard times. We have felt God's meeting us where we are – according to what is on our hearts, our minds.

Jeremiah also prays 'Let me see you take revenge on my enemies, for I have placed my cause in your hands.'

So, even though God has not led him on the paths that he expected, Jeremiah is content to trust that God will work things out in God's own way – and that this is the best way forward.

Even in his frustration, he still places himself fully in God's hands.

'U het my mislei, Here, en ek het my laat mislei!' he complains – and yet he concludes, 'ek gee my saak in u hande'.

No matter how hard life can be, he knows that he is better off in the hands of the living God, and that is where he is going to stay, even if he sometimes grumbles!

The Letter to the Hebrews, our second lesson, has a very similar message.

'Lift up tired hands, then, and strengthen your trembling knees!'

This too acknowledges that life, even the faithful Christian life, can be tough at times.

But we are urged to persevere.

The writer points to the 'cloud of witnesses', the numberless host of faithful people – Jeremiah among them, I am sure – who have held on, and want to tell us it is worth the effort.

'Keep going!' they encourage us, 'Don't give up!'

So, let us listen to their advice, and 'rid ourselves of all everything that gets in the way ... and run with determination the race that lies before us.'

What are we to rid ourselves of?

Well, the writer speaks about two areas of life, to which we need to pay attention – our actions, and our attitudes.

First, the actions.

‘Try to be at peace with everyone’ we read. It takes two to make peace – but no matter what, we on our side must do our bit, and try!

‘Live a holy life’ we read, ‘avoid immorality’.

Too often we think this just means our sexual behaviour – but in fact, it is about living with integrity, with the highest ethical standards, in every part of life, in Church and outside: in politics, in business, in schools, in our communities.

Whether it is money or influence or anything else, we must always act with honesty, oppose corruption, and uphold good practice.

I have written about this, this week, in my monthly letter ‘To the Laos – to the People of God’, which I believe Fr Louis puts up on your notice board. Please do read it. You can also find it on line, on my blog.

We must be a cloud of witnesses to each other, encouraging one another always to do the right things. This is a responsibility that we all have to each other within the body of Christ.

Earlier in the letter to the Hebrews (10:24), we read ‘Let us be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love and to do good’ – or, as the King James Version put it, ‘Let us provoke one another to good deeds.’

We must also have the right attitudes – of trusting in God, and of letting his love and compassion touch us, and flow through us.

‘Do not become bitter’ we are warned – instead, follow Jeremiah’s example, saying ‘Lord, I place my cause in your hands’.

The way to do all this, we are told, is to ‘keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom faith depends, from beginning to end.’

As I said earlier, when Jesus says ‘follow me’, he does not tell us what route he will take us on.

Sometimes, as we heard in our gospel reading, it can be a difficult path, with opposition and division – just as Jeremiah found.

Yet Jesus promises to sustain us on our journey.

Jesus sustains us with his presence – promising to be with us every step of the way.

‘I will be with you to the end of time’ he told his disciples at the end of the Gospel according to St Matthew (Mt 28:20).

Jesus also sustains us with his prayers.

As we heard in the epistle, he is now seated at the right hand of God the Father, where he prays for us without ceasing.

And, finally, Jesus sustains us with his very self – his body and blood, the necessary food for our journey.

So today, as you come to the altar rail, to receive Communion, remember all this.

Come honestly – come acknowledging whatever it is with which you battle in life, or areas where you feel that life has not been what you expected from God.

Come like Jeremiah, nonetheless ready to place your life, once again, into God's hands.

And come with your own hands open, to receive from God whatever, in his infinite love and grace, he has for you – whatever strength or comfort or sustenance you need for the journey of life, on which he leads you.

And may he bless you all, and make you blessings to others – channels of his compassion to one another, to the community in which you live, and to all whom you encounter.

To him be all glory and honour, now and for ever.

Amen.