

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 18th August 2019
Jeremiah 23: 23 – 29; Luke 12: 49 - 56

We read this morning in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah words spoken two and a half thousand years ago, 'I am against the prophets, says the Lord, who dream lies and retail them, misleading my people with wild and reckless false-hoods.'¹

Words from two and a half thousand years ago, but they could be words spoken today by many people who feel that those who hold power and responsibility in our society cannot always be trusted: I am angry with those who dream up lies and peddle them to mislead people in to wild and reckless falsehoods.

In a 21st century world where people have the impression that the rock beneath their feet is shifting or cracking with earthquakes such as Brexit, talk of independence, or the unusual presidential style of Donald Trump in America, who can we trust? Who is telling the truth? Who is acting in our interests as citizens rather than their own interests as politicians?

Back then, in the day of Jeremiah, the country of Judah was threatened with invasion by Babylon. Those who were closest to the king of Judah advised the king that there was nothing to worry about, God would look after the nation, and the king should sue for peace.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, advised something quite different. He said that there would be no peace; Babylon was determined to invade; and unless the people recognised what was happening - read the weather as it were - and adapted their approach and behaviour they would find themselves unprepared for the invasion that was about to happen.

Back then, the times they were a-changing. Jeremiah's words about not trusting those who spread lies and who mislead people were one sign that all was not right in the state of Judah and that change was afoot.

Today, in the UK, in the 21st century distrust is also one sign that our society and our political world is changing.

A very recently published book called *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* by two British professors of politics, Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, about the growth of national populist movements that have given rise to things like Brexit and Donald Trump, identifies four indicators of social and political change that western democracies have been experiencing for some time now.

Professors Eatwell and Goodwin call these indicators the Four Ds, one of which is distrust, the sort of distrust of the ruling elite that Jeremiah was talking about and that has steadily been on the increase in Britain over the past twenty years or so. Although people in the West still have a great deal of confidence in democracy as a political system, significant majorities in almost every country do not believe that their politicians are interested in them or care about people like them. People think that politicians habitually lie in their own self-interest, and don't care about voters.

If distrust is the first D, the second D is destruction. Many voters across the West believe that immigration threatens to destroy their nation's historic identity and established ways of life.

¹ Jeremiah 23: 32

This fear of immigration, which has gone unaddressed by governments for years, is at the heart, for example, of the Brexit vote in the UK and the rise of Donald Trump in the USA.

Along with Distrust and Destruction, the third D that Eatwell and Goodwin identify as signalling political and social change is Deprivation. By Deprivation they mean relative deprivation as a result of rising inequalities of income and wealth, and a loss of faith in a better future: a belief among certain groups within our society that they are losing out relative to others.

Finally, the fourth D that is causing social and political change is Dealignment. By Dealignment the authors mean a weakening of the classical strong bond between mainstream political parties and voters. It used to be that we lived in a country with stable politics, strong parties and loyal voters. Not anymore. Today politics feels unstable, parties are divided amongst themselves, and whereas in the past over 90% of voters identified themselves with either the Labour Party or the Conservatives, today that number is less than 60%. This dealignment makes politics in the West more volatile, fragmented and unpredictable.

Back in Jeremiah's day, two and a half thousand years ago, the world was changing, and Jeremiah wanted people to recognise that, and to adapt accordingly in order to accommodate a changing world. Today, our political and social world is changing and people such as professors Eatwell and Goodwin want us to recognise that, and to adapt accordingly in order to accommodate a changing world.

Jesus put it well in our reading from the Gospel of Luke this morning,

When you see cloud banking up in the west, you say at once that it is going to rain, and rain it does. And when the wind is from the south you say that there will be a heat-wave, and there is ... You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky; how is it you cannot interpret this fateful hour?

Look around you, the political and social weather are changing. We need to interpret that and adapt accordingly. One of the reasons why we find it so hard to accept that things are changing, just like the court prophets found it hard to accept in the days of the kings of Judah when they advised the king not to worry, that the Babylonians wouldn't invade, that peace would continue, is because we know that change brings with it disruption and conflict.

Jesus knew that too. His ministry and mission on earth was to change society – to change how people thought about and related to God, and to change their relationship to the establishment elite, the political and religious rulers of his day. In our reading this morning, Jesus warned that his ministry of peace and love and justice and mercy would be divisive. It would cut through society like a sword and divide people; particularly, it would divide people along generational lines: father against son, mother against daughter.

That shouldn't surprise us for it is true of our society today also. Whether it be the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, or the 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union, or the average age of members of the Conservative Party, our country is divided along generational lines: fathers against sons, mothers against daughters.

Everything is changing, and that is causing conflict. In these days of change we should pay heed to Jeremiah and to Jesus who recognised change in their days, and encouraged people to adapt in order to accommodate the changes in their societies. We could do a lot worse than looking at how Jesus addressed his changing society. It is perhaps not a coincidence that his ministry addressed the four Ds that professors Eatwell and Goodwin describe in their book.

Distrust. Jesus identified that the ruling social and religious elite could no longer be trusted to act in the interests of those they ruled over. So, he raised people's eyes above the political and social context, and refocused them on God. We should do that too. Every nation gets the government it deserves, said a 19th century French philosopher. If we want politicians we can trust, we need to hold ourselves to high standards of trust; we need to look to God and the life of Jesus Christ for guidance.

Destruction. People in Jesus' day feared that their nation was under threat from other ethnic groups; how could Jews remain Jewish in the face of Roman occupation, and weren't gentiles unclean and undeserving of a place amongst God's people? Professors Eatwell and Goodwin show in their book that immigration, which many believe is destroying our historic identity and established way of life, is nothing to be afraid of. Jesus also showed that. He recognised people's fear of foreigners, and addressed those fears by eating with, healing, and including people from a wide variety of national and ethnic backgrounds.

In these days of change we should do that as well; we should recognise people's fears of immigration and find ways to alleviate those fears; reassure them that there is nothing to fear economically or socially from immigration, and where people's fears go further than fear and are expressed as hypocritical racism, face people down, as Jesus did.

Deprivation. In Jesus' day, as in ours, there were rising inequalities of income and wealth. Addressing this formed a major part of Jesus' ministry. He was greatly concerned with the poorest in his society, but he was also concerned with the wellbeing of those who had jobs, but struggled to get by – fishermen – and those who had jobs, but had to take work that was socially suspect – tax collectors. Some of his most critical remarks were reserved for those who used their power to feather their own nests. If we are concerned about the way our society appears to be changing, then we too should address the rising inequalities of income and wealth in our society. Unless we address those rising inequalities, the cracks caused by the political and social earthquakes of recent years will continue to widen.

Dealignment. In Jesus' day religious life, which had once been much more unified was fragmenting. The Pharisees and the Sadducees of the New Testament, with whom Jesus is most in conflict, were just two of many different religious-political parties and denominations competing for people's attention.

The church that Jesus' disciples established on earth after Jesus' crucifixion very quickly became one that was characterised by its capacity to include people from a broad range of backgrounds: of language, religions, nations, ethnicities, social classes, genders. Early Christianity didn't aspire to be a religion that only appealed to people who could affirm a narrow set of doctrinal beliefs. It aspired to be a religion open to anyone who was willing to be a disciple of Jesus no matter their background or their beliefs.

In their book, Professors Eatwell and Goodwin encourage us today to do something similar. They ask, in a country where there are now many competing political parties, is our first past the post system still the best way to vote for our politicians, or might a more proportional voting system in Westminster elections work better? In a county where nationalism is on the rise, are the current constitutional arrangements the best way to hold the UK together, or might a more federal approach work better?

In an age when people no longer trust elites as they once did, should the House of Lords, the house of elites, be replaced with an upper chamber filled with normal people?

Over the course of thousands of years of human history, we might think that nothing changes: the issues remain the same whether it is the Judah of Jeremiah's day; the Judea of Jesus' day; or the UK of our day. But, we should be in no doubt that God's world is always a changing world. Not because God changes, God never changes. But we do, all the time, from one generation to the next.

If we want to live in a society that reflects better God's kingdom, then each generation needs to learn how to be trustful of each other; how to include others who are different from the majority; how to spread wealth and income fairly; and how to align our ruling institutions so that they best reflect the diversity of our society.