

Sermon 10th October 2010
19th Sunday after Trinity

Jer 29:1,4-7; 2 Tim 2:8-15; Luke 17:11-19

I wonder how you react when difficult times occur in your life, when things start going wrong and life becomes all a bit too much of a struggle. Most of us will have experienced some times like that, even if only for a few days or weeks. Some of us may really have been struggling with quite major things at some point in our life for much longer – months, even years. And we respond in variety of ways.

Sometimes we might feel like giving up, throwing in the towel, hanging up our boots? We can become severely depressed and disabled, unable to cope with what we are facing, and begin to feel that life is spiralling out of control. On other occasions we can find ourselves doing an ostridge act, simply burying our heads in the sand, ignoring the rising panic inside and trying to hope the difficulty will pass. At other times we find that we can be brave and squarely face up to life's challenges and meet them head on; that we can fight any injustice or problem and find the energy to seek solutions. We all know of the phrase: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going!" and that may have been our experience too at times.

So when things get tough how do you react? How do I react? Well, the likely answer for all of us is that we respond in all these ways, and more, at different times depending on the circumstances. But how *should* we react and respond to difficulty? Is there a best or better way?

Well I think our lectionary today has something to say to us about how to face difficulties in our lives. In both our Old Testament reading, from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, and the New Testament epistle to Timothy, we find people in situations of great hardship and even persecution. And to both these situations comes a message that is surprising and radical.

Jeremiah was the most prominent prophet in Jerusalem at the time of the capture and defeat of that city and country by the Babylonians under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar. The city fell in the year 597BC and many of the Israelite population were taken in captivity and exiled to Babylon. They remained there for years before being given permission to return only in the early part of the 5th century BC. I wonder if the Bob Marley/ or Boney M song has sprung into your minds at the mention of Babylon –

*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down
and there we wept, when we remembered Zion.*

*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down
and there we wept, when we remembered Zion.*

When the wicked

Carried us away in captivity

Required from us a song

Now how shall we sing the lord's song in a strange land

This is actually a song taken from Psalm 137 and it speaks so clearly of the anguish and depression that descended on the Israelites in exile when they first arrived. How could they sing, how could they continue to worship, how could they continue to live in this strange land? Their religious observance, which bound their identity and corporate life together, was centred on

the Temple in Jerusalem. Now they were removed from this how could they worship and find meaning and hope when God's presence was in the Temple hundreds of miles away?

And it to this situation that Jeremiah, still in Jerusalem, wrote a letter to the priests and elders of the people in exile in Babylon. And his message, a message from God, was this:

Carry on living! Continue to build houses and live in them, continue to plant crops and develop a livelihood for yourselves. Continue to develop new relationships, marry and have children. Continue! Carry on living!

In other words: don't give up, don't despair, but keep going.

This is very much the message that the author of the second letter to Timothy was also expounding, centuries later. Whether or not this letter was written by St Paul himself or one of his followers (and it is much more likely it is the latter), the message is clear. The author is in chains for the gospel as was so common amongst the first few hundred years of Christian mission, where persecution and martyrdom were commonplace. His call is to remember Jesus and to know that the word of God cannot be chained. Like Jeremiah he urges Timothy to endure whatever comes his way for the sake of the gospel, to remain committed to living a life of holiness, and to continue to hold fast to the truth.

Well it's easy to stand in a pulpit and likewise urge endurance and to accept suffering as part of life, but we all know it is not that easy. And where anyway does this leave the other prominent call elsewhere in the scriptures to stand up against injustice and to fight for freedom and peace and the well being of

one another? Surely the message isn't for us to be doormats for others to trample on?

The question comes down to how we balance protest and endurance in the face of suffering? And to help us answer this we go back to Jeremiah's letter and to the gospel set for today.

Jeremiah wasn't encouraging a doormat mentality at all. His call to continue living was not just a 'keep going with your heads down'. No. His message was an emphasis on growth and development, of taking up new challenges and new relationships; a message to actually take this new situation as **an opportunity to thrive and to grow**. It isn't just a matter of keeping the status quo going, but it is **a call to rise to the challenge and to continue to move forward, even in the face of suffering**. It reminds me of St Paul's explanation in Romans that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. Out of dark moments can come light and life; out of despair are the seeds of hope; out of trials and suffering can spring a new energy and drive, a new vision and determination.

Jeremiah was urging the people in Babylon to actively work for greater justice and peace and harmony in their new found captivity. One of the most powerful verses in that reading is this:

"Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare".

In exile the Israelites were to continue to pray and work for the spread of God's rule, even amongst their captors. Suffering and

hardship is never the excuse for giving up on God, or giving up on the people he loves. We are always, whatever our circumstances, to remain committed to God and the welfare of all people. So there will be times when protest against injustice will be right. But on other occasions living a life close to God will in the end speak louder than actions and will turn people around to God.

And this is what happened in Babylon. The exile became a profound moment in the history of Israel when a new found devotion to God, a new commitment to follow his way was forged, and this became a tool for changing the Babylonian hearts too. After a few years the Babylonians relented and allowed the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, where their new fervour for God was seen in the expansion of synagogues up and down the country, the growth and development of the rabbinical class, and a reanalysis of the Israelite story and past with a new fervour to study and pray.

In today's gospel Luke recounts the story of ten lepers who were healed by Jesus in a most unremarkable way. They seemed to be simply walking past each other – Jesus heading in one direction and the lepers in the other – and they simply asked him for mercy. Jesus responded by saying present yourselves to the Priests, and on their way they realised they were healed of their dreadful disease. And we know that only one rushed back to say thank you, to which Jesus seemed to give a double healing: Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well”.

What has this small healing miracle story to say to our theme today of facing difficulty and suffering? To me it is a useful summary of what has already been said.

The lepers had managed to keep going despite their ostracisation from society. They drew strength from supporting one another, which we too must learn from. But most importantly they knew that their hope resided in the person of Jesus. Whatever our circumstances, good or bad, we must always seek God in Jesus, for mercy, strength to endure and the possibility of healing and reconciliation. These lepers knew that Jesus held the answer to their plight, just as the Israelites found their strength in the presence of God amongst the Babylonians, and St Paul found in his captivity in Rome. **Remember Jesus** was Paul's command to Timothy.

It is only when we are united with God in Christ that the reality of his Kingdom's power can be known – the reality to find strength to cope with whatever life throws at us, and the reality that we can even move beyond the suffering to live lives of gratitude and service, seeking the welfare of others and working for the growth of the kingdom.

St Paul's words in Romans come to mind again: as words to hold onto whatever we are facing:

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.