

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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## **HOPE IN DESPAIR**

**29<sup>th</sup> September 2013**

Jeremiah 32: 1-3a, 6-15

Luke 24:13-27

Over the past few weeks we have seen Jeremiah teach that God can be flexible in implementing his promises and his judgements, as situations and people change. We have heard him proclaim the judgement of God on his own people as the inevitable result of their actions, since God has made the world in such a way that actions have consequences. And we have seen him weep with anguish when his words came true.

If you faithfully tell the people amongst whom you live that they need to change or God can no longer save them, that their actions must bring disaster, and if then disaster follows, you need not be too terribly surprised if the authorities begin to look at you askance. You might be able to predict that you will end up in jail. Today we find that this is where Jeremiah is. He is confined in the court of the guard in the royal palace. In difficult times you need to keep your unpredictable forces close at hand, so that they are under control, and so when Jerusalem was besieged by the Babylonians, as Jeremiah had said would happen, the royal reaction was to lock up the prophet who had spoken the truth.

We are not told how Jeremiah felt about this: no doubt he was intelligent enough to know why this had happened to him and appreciate the irony. It is doubly ironic that the prophet was locked up so that he might not speak depressing words, like "God will not help, you have turned from God," when now that the disaster has come, he has changed what he has to say.

There is no need to say that God will judge, that disaster is coming, once it has actually come. There is now no averting it (although if you read the history of the time, you will see that the leaders were still trying to prevent the disaster, flailing around to find a new powerful ally, Egypt). As far as Jeremiah, that far-seeing prophet is concerned, the consequence of the action has happened and what he has been warning about has arrived. That part of his work is done so he needs to look further ahead. What will God do next, what will he do for his chastened, beleaguered people? And so in the midst of disaster, Jeremiah speaks of hope.

He speaks of hope in the two chapters before what we read today. He speaks of Jerusalem being rebuilt. He talks about God making a new covenant with his people. Today we see him literally putting his money where his mouth is. He buys a field. In his situation in prison and while his city is under siege, this is a real act of faith. It is relatively easy to speak. But Jeremiah has to show that he is committed to his message. Now that it looks so unlikely that there can ever be a happy ending, even if the Egyptians come on board, the prophet who is talking of hope and a future shows he means what he says, he believes his own words by the way he acts. A couple of weeks ago we heard him tell that God said he would not make a full end, and now the time has come to show what that means. It means that there will still be life for God's people in their land.

What seems like disaster, what is currently a disaster such as no one had ever dreamed they would have to live through, also means the beginning of something new.

And so Jeremiah buys a field. He buys it with full legal procedures, so that no one can doubt that he intends to hold the property in perpetuity. Because he believes that there will be a perpetuity and a need for property again. There was hope despite the darkness. What had happened, the siege, the threat of exile, was not an end, but a new beginning.

Cleopas and his friend also felt that they had come to the end of something. They had thought that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. They had thought it, but now they weren't so sure. Now their hopes had died and something had ended. But Jesus, meeting them incognito on their road, showed them that it was not the end but a beginning of something, something rooted in scripture and history, but which took the future in a whole new direction. This is why that story of the road to Emmaus is so evocative, so powerful. We all know what it is to have our hopes dashed, to come to the end of things in our life: the death of someone we love, a change in our health, the departure of a friend, the loss of a job or a home or a familiar pattern to life. We have all been there, many times. It takes the eyes of faith, it takes our eyes being opened by our faith to realise that every end is a new beginning.

Of course, we do not always want new beginnings. When we have been comfortable, happy with what already was, we don't see the need for things to change. Cleopas and the other disciples had been quite happy, quite excited, really, following Jesus and waiting for the day when he would finally reclaim Israel's status as top nation, supreme in God's purposes and favour. They didn't really want to have to re-think what it meant that Jesus was the Messiah, even though it would mean something far better and greater than they had hoped for. And they are not unique in that. In fact they are a very good representative sample of humanity. Taken by and large, we don't like change. We don't ask for it unless we are driven to it. Very often we resist it with all our might and main.

We are particularly resistant to change that begins with disaster. We have all seen the husband of wife set free by the death of a spouse whose care had completely curtailed his or her life. That widow or widower knows that they are now free to embrace life again, but someone they loved has died, and it can seem almost a betrayal of their love to turn and live again.

And which of us did not, years ago in school, fume and fret at the teacher who failed us in an exam, rather than turning to learn from the experience and so become a better scholar?

We are such conservative creatures, that too often it takes a disaster of one kind or another to prompt us to make changes, reach out, grow at little. The lives that are most full of excitement and adventure, the people who end up showing the greatest wisdom and depth to their characters, are not the ones who have sailed through their lives unassailed and untouched by tragedy. To take some well known examples, think of Joni Eareksson, paralysed by a diving accident aged 17 who from that, from what she learned from her despair and suffering, developed a world-wide ministry of hope. Or think of the Dutch woman' Corrie Ten Boom, who spent time in a Nazi concentration camp, where her beloved sister died, but later was able to use that to reach out to others with experiential teaching about forgiveness.

People like that are those who have taken the reverses of life and learned from them, who have used them as springboards to look for and live with God's next new thing. Like Jeremiah in his Royal prison.

What is true in our personal lives is also true in the life of the world, of nations and peoples, of movements and ideas. The church has known it as well as anyone. Who was it who said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church? Over and over again it has proved true. It doesn't mean that the shedding of that blood was not a terrible thing - just ask the Christians of Peshawar. But although it always feels and looks like an end, very often it is not. The most recent example might be the phenomenon of the church in China. Only thirty years ago to be a Christian was to live in fear. Bible and religious art objects, like crosses, were buried in the ground to keep them safe. People, especially pastors and leaders, were taken off to hard labour. And those of us watching from afar thought that the church in China was doomed. But now the Chinese church is one of the largest and fastest growing in the world. It no longer looks so much like the churches from which nineteenth century missionaries came, but it is authentic, Chinese, learning how to live and witness and express God's truth in its own context. We who might have despaired should give God thanks.

It takes a lot of faith to meet the reverses of life with a forward-looking attitude. Jeremiah bought a field. He showed with his actions that he had faith in God not to abandon his people, always to keep loving, planning, redeeming. We too say that we believe in the love of God to bring good out of evil. How can we be sure that our actions bear witness to our words, to our faith?

Some people show it in how they spend their time, showing that they believe God values every life, by the way they care for the very young or the very old, or those who for other reasons cannot cope with life by themselves. Some show it in the way that they devote time to prayer, interceding for those who are busy, who are sad, who are influential, who are not. Some show it in the use they make of their money, whether wealthy or not, deliberately living simply so that they can give more. Demonstrating that their joy is found in Christ and his life rather than in all that money can buy. And some perform acts of faith, like Jeremiah when he bought his field, so that it may be known that they have faith in God's good purposes for the world.

"We had hoped" said Cleopas. How often these words or that thought comes to our minds as well. When it does, look to God, to Christ to open up a new beginning. His purposes are always greater than we can hope for.