

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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THE KING AND THE KINGDOMS

20th November 2016

Jeremiah 50:4-10

Luke 23:33-43

Two of the questions which have been growing in my mind as, with many of you, I have been reading through the works of the prophets have been these: "When did Christianity forget about the nation or the world?" And "When did we become so individualistic?"

In reality, I know that Christianity has not forgotten about the world: we have always had a mandate to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, after all, and we live in a time when that mandate has come closer than ever to being fulfilled, even if the areas of the world which have known the gospel for longest may need to hear and embrace its message again. But when we think of the world or of our nation, we tend to think in terms of mission, not in terms of solidarity and belonging. And yet, it is solidarity and belonging that I find in the prophets. When they condemn their own people for faithlessness, as they so often do, they do not stand aloof and say "But it won't affect me. I will be all right." Instead they acknowledge that their own lives are bound up with the lives of their nation. As indeed our lives are bound up with our nation as well.

In what we read this morning, we meet Jeremiah speaking about what would be the fate of the power which was then in the ascendant, the nation of Babylon. And as he predicts its ultimate fall, he talks of and to his own nation about how they shall come back together to seek God's face, and about how God will lead and guide them. His picture is of a whole nation, which even before the disasters which came on them, had been divided into two kingdoms, coming together before God, coming before God because they are a nation and they belong together in faith and worship as well as in other ways.

Over and again in the prophetic writings we have heard that God spoke through his prophets to whole nations, the faithful and the unfaithful alike. He spoke to the nation of Israel and the division known as Judah, but God also spoke to the nations of Edom, of Moab, of Philistia and, as we heard today, of Babylon. Each was addressed as a whole, not as the individuals within them, although it was often the acts of individuals with which God took issue.

Of course, in those days, people were expected to have the faith of their king or leader, which is a bit different from the society we live in. But that expectation was

not only true in those days, but in all days from the beginning of society until – when? Until about 50 or 60 years ago. The Bible is predicated on the idea that people will follow their king or leader in faith, and not to do so, as when the prophets stood up to the syncretism of many of the kings of Israel and Judah, as when the early Christians stood up to the Roman polytheism, was abnormal enough to be notable.

Maybe humanity should have learned from the abnormality of the early Christians, maybe to expect individuals to choose and to practice faith should have become the expectation, but “normal service” was resumed when a Christian emperor, Constantine, came to the throne of imperial Rome. He was Christian, so his empire would be as well, and it would be assumed that the people of it would now follow the Christian way. Of course, this was why and when a lot of accretions from other traditions crept in, just as they had in the days when Jeremiah denounced his entire nation, because of their king. Sometimes we who live in the era where faith is a matter of personal choice, might be tempted to lament the influence of Constantine, which led to the establishment of Christendom, and to a fair bit of warring and of nasty practice being attributed to people were named “Christian”. But Constantine did make it possible for the faith to spread far faster and further and to greater numbers of people than the embryonic church had reached before then. There is no point in lamenting history, but it is good to know it and to learn from it, if we can.

Individualism crept into Western thinking at the time of the Enlightenment in the late 17th century, which was also the time of the Reformation and of the establishment of many different forms of Christian church. It began with the invention of printing – possibly the most important invention in the whole history of the world! If people had books, they had access to ideas for themselves. If people had the Bible, then they could read for themselves what it said, and could work out for themselves how they thought that they should practice their faith. And so the idea of individual autonomy and responsibility advanced, and in Victorian times it flourished in the church, with personal commitment to Christ being emphasised as the only way into the faith.

The idea that a nation could belong to a faith still persisted, though, with little question, right up until the end of the Second World War. It persists to this day, but with far more questions being asked of it than previously. Questions are asked in the UK about why Church of England bishops sit by right in the House of Lords, (and the questions are about why they are there at all, about why all of them are there, and about why only English bishops are there), questions are asked about the place of religious observance in schools (and the idea of the minister coming into Scottish Schools is a custom which might soon become a part of history); questions are asked about the monarch being head of the church of England – along with other questions being asked about the monarchy. It is now a difficult balancing act to be allowed prayers before Council meetings or before the beginning of business in the Scottish Parliament, or in Westminster. There are all sorts of ways that the Christian identity of the nation is questioned – why have Christmas lights when you can have winter lights? And so on and so on..

You could say that the church has only itself to blame for these things, by joining in with the Enlightenment idea of individual choice and responsibility. But individual choice and responsibility is also a Biblical theme, and found prominently within the

works of the prophets. So there is no point in lamenting history, although it is good to know it and to learn from it, if we can.

However, Jeremiah can still address whole nations as one, as he does, and not only his own nations, but also the nations around whom he speaks about with rhetorical relish. So are we wrong to have allowed such a personal element creep into our understanding of faith? Or, to reframe the question, have we lost something if we allow the idea of personal responsibility to erode our sense of where we are as a nation before God?

This is the Sunday before Advent, which is known in the Church as the Sunday of Christ the King. It was established first in the Roman Catholic church, in 1925, to highlight to an increasingly secular world that Christ is supreme, above political allegiances or personal desires and priorities. Certainly, this is a message that the world needs to hear. However, today we read an account of Jesus' only coronation in this world. He was strung up on a cross, with a crown of thorns on his head, and the notice above his head proclaimed him to be King – King of the Jews.

We live in a country which might best be described as post-Christian, even if some of the trappings of Christendom still hang around and can be used to give the Christian message a platform. We have the opportunities afforded by public prayer, when it is permitted, by parish funerals, by religious observance in schools. Meanwhile we live in a nation that is hurting and divided and often fearful, and in a world which is hurting and divided and fearful. And to that nation and to that world we offer Christ, our King. A king crowned with pain, by powers which were divided and people who were fearful. To have Jesus as king does not mean that we can pretend that everything is all right. It means that we can embrace the pains of life and the wounded-ness of people and society.

I wonder how many of you have scars on your body, which remind you of something every time you notice them? They might be scars from an operation or from an accident, large or small. Sometimes we hate our scars, because they come in a place which we think is disfiguring – scars to the face especially. But they are part of our story.

If you remember the story of the risen Jesus meeting with Thomas, you will recall that Thomas wanted to see the marks in his hands and side. And he did. The marks, the scars were there, even though death itself was conquered. Those scars now became the badge of honour, the marks of Jesus' true nature, his being the Son of God. They are part of his story. In Japan, if a quality piece of porcelain is broken, when it is mended sometimes, far from trying to mask the cracks and flaws from the breakage, they are highlighted in gold leaf. They are part of the story of the piece from now on.

Jesus' scars are part of his story, and scars mean healing. As individuals we bear scars on our soul, where we have been hurt and in Jesus have found ourselves healed. As part of our society we are those called to bring healing, in the love of Jesus, so that although our history is what it is and will be what it will be, our part in it will be the part that means that the pains and divisions, the fear and the hurt that we come through can no longer harm us.

As Christians we are more than individuals who have chosen to follow Christ. We are part of society and part of the history of this part of the world. Our calling, like that of the faithful prophets of ancient times, is to stand with the people among whom we live, and speak to them and show them what God says. As Christians we serve the one whose power was made perfect in weakness, whose suffering was to save, and who promised grace to his companion with his latest breath. He makes us citizens of his kingdom, so that as we live in this world, we are not wholly of it. May we embrace the broken way of Christ, so that the world may see that scars do not mean failure, but promise healing. Amen.

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