

**Pentecost 21**  
**13/10/2013**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7**  
**Psalm 66**  
**Luke 17:1-19**

### **Pray for those who persecute you**

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Over the last couple of months we've been following the fortunes of the people of Israel, as related through the preaching of Jeremiah. It has not been a very pretty story, dominated by talk of sin, judgement and destruction. There has been more than *just* that, because the scriptures only ever speak of sin from the perspective of salvation, but perhaps the negativity has seemed a dominant part of what we've been hearing.

In that context, today's reading seems to sound a positive note. In 597BCE the first exiles were taken from Judah to Babylonia, and the letter we've heard in the reading this morning is to them. Jeremiah tells those now: settle down where you are, for God will make use of this foreign power for your benefit. After the threats and death and destruction of the previous weeks' readings, it seems at last like the worst is over for the Israelites.

And yet the news is actually not as good as it might appear to us with our desire for a happy ending. When we today hear the call to pray for the welfare of the city in which find ourselves, we're likely to think this a call to good citizenship. Yet, we need to keep in mind that *these* people *desperately* don't want to be where they are. An alternative to the set psalm for last week was Psalm 137, which begins with the familiar "By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down" and ends with a prayer for blessing upon those who bashed the heads of Babylonian children against the rocks! It is in the context of such depth of emotion that Jeremiah's injunction is heard: "Pray to the Lord on Babylon's behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." It is, then, an open question as to whether or not the letter from Jeremiah to the exiles is a matter of good news or bad news.

Our relationship to our enemies is a theme which Jesus also addressed, and in a similarly disconcerting way: "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5. 44). This is one of the sayings of Jesus with which we will usually have some "trouble". Constant rejection of our selves is difficult to bear, and that is what we often face when we attempt to love those who can't or won't love us back. The best we might be able to manage is simply not engaging with those who might oppose us, so that at least we don't have to respond to them too negatively if we find we can't respond to them positively. This much, at least, has to be better than fighting.

And yet, "love your enemies" as a *moral* injunction is not quite the force of Jeremiah's teaching, and neither even of Jesus' teaching. For there is a distinction to be drawn here between our interest in how we are to be in relation to each other – what I will call the moral concern – and how God is in relation to us who are worried about our relationships to each other – what I'll call the theological concern. As we hear what Jeremiah says to these first exiles, we need to keep in mind the theme of divine judgement which resounds throughout the book of Jeremiah: Jeremiah has interpreted what has happened to these exiles as a matter of God's judgement on the

people. There is a *rejection* here of the people's self-understanding and consequent actions. This judgement and rejection have not ceased in the people's arrival in Babylon but continue in the instruction that they pray for the well-being of their oppressors. They are not being called here to good citizenship or an ancient "political correctness". This would be to reduce Jeremiah's preaching to the kind of sentimentality which simply "wishes" that "people could get along with each other". There is nothing wrong with the moral injunction, of course – let us seek to live together in peace! Yet the mere call to morality does not tell the story of the difficulty of the moral life, and what is at stake if it is not achieved. The call to be *for* their enemies, unwillingly as it will have to be met, was not a sentimental summons but a word of judgement: there was *no* other way. These people are called to *embrace* God's inescapable judgement: this is God's righteousness, God's way of making right.

Our situation, of course, is not the same as Jeremiah's exiles'. But to show how their reality is also ours, we'll consider two things very familiar to us yet perhaps not obviously linked to Jeremiah's word to the exiles: heaven and its earthly anticipation, the Eucharist.

"Heaven" is one of those words we have managed thoroughly to sentimentalise. For those with religious affections, piety might remind us that we are first to affirm that heaven is the place where God is, but more generally it is more strongly associated with our own desires. To the extent that we desire to be sharing heaven with other people, they are necessarily people we *like*, otherwise it would not be heaven. These two notions – that heaven is where God is and also where the people are people we like – pretty much sum up our cultural idea of heaven, to the extent that we still have one. We might even go so far as to say that we think as if heaven is where God is *because* it is a place where the people are people we like: the security and happiness which good friends and a strong family bring feels like the confirmation that God is with us.

Consider this in relation to the experience of the exiles in Babylon, hearing Jeremiah's letter: this will be a place of blessing for you – the very presence of God for you – but it is so not in the presence of friends but of enemies. And this is not a mere endurance test. The call is not to tough it out, to be joyful even though the neighbour is an enemy, waiting for it to get better. They are not to await the overcoming of their enemy, but to pray for their enemy's being blessed by the same God they had previously hoped would destroy Babylon. The force of Jeremiah's letter is to call the Judeans to recognise their time in Babylon *as itself* the possibility of God's continuing to be present to them. If "heaven" has anything to do with the presence of God, then this doesn't look very heavenly. To be in the presence of this God is not necessarily to be in a comfortable place.

The force of this is all the stronger in the way in which the church has been taught to enact in its worship the presence of this God: through the Eucharist. Over the last couple of weeks I've spoken with the children about the command carved into our communion table, "This do in remembrance of me". The remembrance is not simply a "remembering" or bringing-to-mind but a "making present" of Jesus. Yet, at the same time, it is not merely "Jesus" who is present, like the returned ghost of some long-lost friend, but the Jesus who is confessed also to be the Christ. We need always to remember(!) that the expression "Jesus Christ" is not a first name-second name combination but a contracted sentence: Jesus *is the* Christ. The importance of this is

that it is a *nonsensical* sentence: that a crucified blasphemer, and so an enemy of the people of God, is named as the one who matters the most: *Jesus* is the Christ, and not some other apparently more suitable candidate. For the most part this affirmation no longer shocks us, which is to say that we are too familiar with our own confession and liturgy. To say that “*Jesus* is the Christ” and that “in Babylon’s welfare you will find your welfare” is to make the same affirmation in both cases. Our Eucharist, then, is no simple fellowship meal between like-minded people. It is the call in Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles: be fed by one rejected – implicitly, one rejected by us. It is not a sentimental “sharing” with one another, but a glimpse of heaven: fellowship with a God so strange that we would otherwise be likely to crucify him.

What, then, of heaven and our deep, deep desire for peace? It is an impossible peace and an impossible dream, for we cannot imagine ourselves reconciled to a true enemy. Yet, it is just this which is promised as the gift of God: not you without them. We might better ask, then, what of earth? What are we to do now? We are to begin to learn to recognise heaven when we see it, to recognise what it looks like to be in the presence of this God. For, to say it again, to be in the presence of this God is not necessarily to be in a comfortable place. As such, we are called not so much to not create heaven on earth as begin to live with it, learning to love what God commands and desire what he promises (Augustine?). In this we are made the answer to our own prayer: that God’s will be done, on earth as in heaven.

It all sounds, of course, like a lot of hard work. The hope we have that it might still be a liberating, life-giving possibility is in the words of an enemy who looks down at us from a cross and prays, “Father forgive them, for they haven’t got a clue”. In this the one we have rejected embraces us, and we need only hug God back.

“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”. Pray for those who persecute you; this is what God does, and what we are to do.

May God in his grace, give his people what they need to fulfil this high calling and, through this, to enter into his yet higher salvation. Amen.

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