

Wendy Young sermon Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2016  
Water, Faith and Justice:  
Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22 and Luke 18:9-14

Thank you for the kind invitation to join you this morning on behalf of Christian Aid and at the invitation of your Eco-Church group.

I have a confession to make. When Chris Brown helpfully e-mailed me way back in the summer he had told me that you didn't really use the lectionary here in St. Paul's, that is the three year cycle of bible readings compiled and followed by a number of protestant denominations - but I forgot that he'd told me that, because when Michael e-mailed me a few weeks back to ask for the readings I would like today I sent him two of the lectionary passage references and to be honest if I had remembered what Chris had said and known I could have avoided them – I would have.

And since Chris had given me the theme of water to speak on there were many many other passages I could have chosen. While not enslaved by the lectionary I do however like the challenge of using it and following it often means I can't ignore the passages I'd rather avoid.

Using the lectionary also gives me a sense of connection to the church global, a connection that is particularly valuable when working for Christian Aid, the church in action, working to end poverty and injustice in over 40 countries across the world. I like to remember that just as I join with you here there are others across the world who have, are and will be wrestling with these passages today.

And with all that said by way of re-amble you can imagine that it was to my great relief when I turned to the Jeremiah passage we read together this morning and I read verse 22. 'Can any idols of the nations bring rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Is it not you, O LORD our God? We set our hope on you, for it is you who do all this.'

Which led me to read the whole of chapter 14 and to discover that the prophet Jeremiah was writing to people caught up in a devastating drought and who were searching, not just for water, but also for God in their time of suffering.

<sup>2</sup> Judah mourns  
and her gates languish;  
they lie in gloom on the ground,  
and the cry of Jerusalem goes up.

<sup>3</sup> Her nobles send their servants for water;  
they come to the cisterns,  
they find no water,  
they return with their vessels empty.

They are ashamed and dismayed  
and cover their heads,  
<sup>4</sup> because the ground is cracked.  
Because there has been no rain on the land  
the farmers are dismayed;  
they cover their heads.

Obviously I wasn't relieved to read of such suffering, but I was relieved to find such an obvious connection to the theme of water and even to the facts that Chris had sent me about water shortages in this area. That in Cambridge you live in the driest region of the UK; on average you have less rainfall than Jerusalem but use an average of 133 litres per person every day. And you also have a rapidly rising population but no new sources of water.

And before any of you are anxiously reading between the lines and anticipating me saying anything about water shortages in Cambridge as a punishment or judgement from God for any collective sinfulness please let me quickly alleviate your fears. I'm not going there. Although having noticed online that you recently had a sermon series on the 7 deadly sins I am slightly less concerned about connecting the consequences of our collective human action in western, northern nations with the challenges of a changing climate being faced by many across the world, including those enduring flooding and droughts here in the UK. Living in Scotland I am more familiar with the flooding than with the drought but this summer I had as close an encounter with the extremes of water plenty and scarcity than I have had in a long time.

I had decided to walk from Glasgow where I live to the north coast of Scotland, a journey of some 300 miles along the West Highland Way and the Cape Wrath trail – two very different long distance walks.

The first week along the 95 miles of the West Highland Way was straight forward enough, though it is not a challenge to be underestimated.

The second week, which was the first of the Cape Wrath Trail, the challenge was on an entirely different level – the rain started on Saturday afternoon and didn't stop until the early hours of Monday morning which meant that by Sunday afternoon all the rivers were swollen in spate – and I had many rivers to cross to get to my intended destination. Cutting a long and quite dramatic story short I ended up having to pitch my tent and camp on the Sunday night because I couldn't get across the largest of the rivers to the bothy – the hut I had hoped to stay in.

I had a few more close encounters of the watery kind that second week but by the third week things changed almost as dramatically as my river crossing story – when the temperatures soared and I now needed the rivers like never before to ensure I had enough to drink.

This three week adventure culminated in an ascent of Ben Hope – the most northerly munro, a munro being the mountains of Scotland of over 3000ft/900m, with 40 other people walking it as a fundraiser for Christian Aid Scotland's Malawi appeal.

On my long walk to Ben Hope I merely had a glimpse of how vulnerable our relationship is with water. A vulnerability from having either too much or too little, and unlike my hike to hope, for many across the world including Malawi this vulnerable relationship is a relentless and unending journey.

With Scotland having a special and historic relationship with Malawi, Christian Aid Scotland was particularly keen to respond to the current drought that has destroyed 1.5 million acres of crops which were almost ready for harvest.

In the south of the country, half of all crops have been entirely wiped out and food prices are soaring.

In August, we learned that locusts threatened a large proportion of the newly planted crops planned for the winter harvest. All of which means that 6.7 million people, more than the entire population of Scotland, will need food assistance until the end of March 2017. And these droughts come after intense flooding in 2015 that affected over 600,000 people in the same area.

And while it sounds terribly like Malawi is being afflicted by the plagues of Egypt we would be incredibly wrong to jump to Jeremiah like conclusions.

Far from this being wrath afflicted on Malawi as punishment for something they have done wrong – their suffering has been caused by the actions of others.

The effects of a changing climate, that is the erratic, unreliable and chaotic weather patterns, are being experienced most intensely by those who have done the least to cause the problem.

After all the carbon footprint of the Malawian lifestyle is many many times less than that of someone in Scotland, or England for that matter.

This it is not just an issue of climate change, as important as that is, this is an issue of climate justice.

But the environmental movement, and those working for climate justice have began to realise, perhaps unlike Jeremiah, that exposing people to their carbon guilt is a very poor motivator for the much needed behaviour change to bring threatened climate chaos under control.

As a favourite writer of mine, Frederick Beuchner says:

'The danger of our guilt, both personal and collective, is less that we won't take it to heart than that we'll take it to heart overmuch and let it fester there in ways that we ourselves often fail to recognize. More often than not, guilt is not merely the consequence of wrongdoing, but the extension of it.'

And while in the context of climate change, a context we all live in, it is often with the best of intentions of living more lightly and more considerately of others we find ourselves saying with Saint Paul 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.'

Or perhaps having got in touch with our environmental consciousness we find ourselves praying with the Pharisee in the gospel passage read today:

God, I thank you that I am not like other people: car drivers, frequent flyers, non-recyclers, or even like this tap-runner when brushing his teeth. I fast from plastic twice a week and I live on a tenth of the carbon I used to.

And so in hearing about Malawi and other places experiencing a devastating Judah like drought we may find ourselves as despondent as the tax collector or as self-righteous as the Pharisee.

However, rather than being like either the tax-collector or the Pharisee I suggest that it is Jeremiah who should be our prophetic role model in the face of climate injustice. Jeremiah's prolific denunciations of the people of God throughout the book of his name flow from the Lord lament in chapter 2:

'my people have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.'

It is of little surprise to find this metaphor echoed in the first verses of chapter 14 where the shortage of water is anything but metaphorical.

Her nobles send their servants for water;

they come to the cisterns,

they find no water,

they return with their vessels empty.

They are ashamed and dismayed

and cover their heads,

The people of Judah are not just in a physical dry patch, they are in a spiritual drought too.

Rather than turning to the fountain of living water they have turned to other sources to quench their spiritual thirst.

They have turned to those with the message that they want to hear rather than the message they need to hear.

They have turned to other gods, to idols.

To quote Alistair Macintosh, author and activist, from a gathering of eco-congregations in Scotland a number of years ago:

Our first Jeremiah, prophetic, task is 'to expose how consumerism is a form of idolatry because it puts material acquisition before God. We must be participants in seeking with one another promised "life abundant" – not by accumulating "stuff" or raking in the money, but through spiritual quickening (John 10:10). Such is the good news in troubled times.'

Alistair is a Quaker and so draws that wonderful phrase 'spiritual quickening' from that tradition, he goes on to unpack a little more of what that means by saying;

'The great work of people of faith must be to deepen spirituality. Only by working at such depth of what it means to be a human being in today's world can we start to see, and to challenge, the blandishments of consumerism that keep us in bondage and spoils the world that God underpins.'

And I would suggest that we must lead the way in turning from the leaky cistern of consumerism, our unquenchable thirst for more, and deepen our spirituality by drinking deep from the fountain of living water. Walking with rather than wandering from God.

And like Jeremiah it is also our prophetic task, to call out those still denying human induced climate change, to recognise that as in Jeremiah's day they are turning to false prophets, listening and repeating the messages they want to hear rather than facing up to what they need to hear.

And our third prophetic task is to lead people from avoidance or despair to hope. Not to a naïve optimism but a grounded hope that another world is possible.

*As my former colleague Susan Durber wrote in Christian Aid's global theology of climate change: 'We need to share the vision of a world in which humankind and nature are living in a more gracious, joyful and just relationship; in which our own lives are lived with simplicity and sufficiency; where we are no longer simply consumers, but part of a renewed communion with creation.'*

And finally as Jesus's parable teaches us we take on these prophetic tasks in an attitude of humility, neither trusting solely on our efforts or judging others. But rather living out the answer to another prophet's question; what does the Lord require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God? So help us, God, Amen.