

UBUNTU!

Eucharist, 11th September 2016

Texts: Jeremiah 4, 11-12, 22-28; 1 Timothy 1, 12-17 & Luke 15, 1-10.

Introduction

Preachers are expected to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable! And we are *comfortable* in many ways, - compared with so many around God's troubled Kingdom; especially those on the grip of malign theocracies. However, we cannot be complacent, for there are no boundaries to the tides of religious hatred and violence now surging around the *Global Village*. Fifteen years ago we watched in horror, as the twin towers collapsed in the dust of lost lives, lost hopes and lost certitudes; - the assumed parameters of global religion, cultures and power politics had all changed dramatically.

Lost Sheep

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin are about our ultimate values. We may each have differing answers as to what we might wish to save, - if a fire breaks out, or the ship begins to sink. When they were imprisoned, Alexander Solzenitshin and Terry Waite discovered what they possessed, when their liberty and all their possessions were taken from them; - they retained their inner strength, the will to survive. Their, - our fundamental human right is to exist, not despite others' human rights, but because we value other peoples' human rights. Human rights are, - or should be universal. In Southern Africa they greet each other with, *Ubuntu!* - I am because you are! For in God's world, we all belong to each other: the basis of ethics and the acquisition of a personal *moral compass*.

Golden Rule

The Golden Rule, - to Love God and your Neighbour as Yourself, is reflected in the doctrine most major religions; - it should be the overriding principle governing civilised behaviour within, and between faith groups. Loving God and one's neighbour is the universal truth of hospitality. However, it is interpreted, subverted and ignored by so many religious leaders and their followers, those who pursue power for their own distorted ends.

Theocracy

The nature of theology, - the knowledge of God and the expression of *God Talk* has been debated and fought over for many centuries, - by those who claim to have unique insights into the unknowable Divine. The Divine presence, whom Paul described to the Athenians; - "The God who made the World, - is not far from each one of us, - in whom we live and have our being"¹. Some theologians assert that suffering is deserved, - to be inflicted by the will of the *merciful* God!² Such theologians are at best deluded; however, many claim their perceived privilege of interpreting God's will, to confront and to inflict suffering on those of differing persuasions. Whilst in the Gospels, we hear Jesus reflecting God's desire to share his love with all, especially with the *other*, - the outsider, - the disadvantaged.

Iran

As we heard in the readings, - Paul welcomed God's grace poured out on those of love and faith. But Jeremiah reported: The Lord said, "*My people are stupid: they are experts at doing evil, but failures at doing what is good*". Blaise Pascal, the C17 French polymath remarked, - *Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction*. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 overthrew the oppressive secular dictatorship of Shah Pahlavi; but gave rise to the religious tyranny of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Mullahs and the savagery of the Revolutionary Guards. Shiite fundamentalism is now inflicted upon the people of Iran and more widely across Iraq and Syria, and now in Libya; as well as supporting ISIS and other Islamic terrorists.

The ayatollahs' aggressive promotion of a narrow vision and violent interpretation of Islam counters any peaceful opposition, demanding submission to the tyrannical will of Allah. Since 1979 more than 120,000 have been executed and more than 30,000 imprisoned in Iran. And each year, thousands more are detained, tortured and many hundreds are executed, with minimal legal process. As in the case of Nazinan Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the dual nationality aid worker jailed for five years without charge. And there are other repressive regimes nearby.

Liberty

The Met' Commissioner has told us to expect terrorist attacks here in London. As we face the threat of violence on our streets; we may wonder, is the presence of heavily armed police the most effective long term measure to discourage religious extremism; when Christians are being driven from their ancient homes across the Middle East? There are already many here in London who suffer religious persecution. The Ahmadiyya Community was driven from Pakistan for practising their reformed, *back to basics* vision of Islam. They bravely preach, practise and even label their cars with the slogan, - *Love for all Hatred for None*. The Ahmadiyya are loyal British citizens who do much for the community at large, but they are regarded as heretics, to be ostracised and threatened here in Britain by other Islamic sects.

Religion

The best way to counter *Bad Religion* should be by *Good Religion*, - faith that practises the *Golden Rule*, - of God's love for **all** Creation, without violence and oppression. Islam states that the faithful will be judged by their works! So how is Christianity judged by those on the outside? There are those who see us as another rather quaint, irrelevant community, gathering in fancy clothes, to do strange things on Sundays and then spend the rest of the week in argument! But then Archbishop William Temple said that, - *The Church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members*. So, if the Church is to benefit those outside its walls, it must be seen, and its prophetic voice must be heard; to counter the raucous discord of **bad** religion, with the serene melodies, love and harmony of **good** religion.

We may pray that Prime Minister Theresa May is guided by her faith. William Pitt, her C18th predecessor, wrote to his friend William Wilberforce, - *The principles and practice of Christianity are simple, and lead not to meditation only, but to action*. Words reflected by President Kennedy; - *The consequences of our actions are great. Greater still are the results of our inactions*. Wilberforce became a man of action, guided by his vision of Christian ethics he became a leader in the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade; however, sadly slavery continues just below the surface, here in Britain and around the world. And there are many other causes requiring action to promote and to protect human rights, - the rights that we take for granted.

Conclusion

In Jesus' parable, the shepherd and the widow invited their friends to share in rejoicing over the return of the lost sheep and the lost coin; - representing those who had returned to faith in God: those who had recovered their lost values of faith, - faith demonstrated by the *Golden Rule*, - *to Love God and their Neighbours as Themselves!* Loving God is the easy bit! Before we can love our neighbours, we must first learn to love ourselves. But that's a topic for another sermon! Amen

Norman Allen

Notes:

1. Acts 17, 24 – 28.
2. Rabbi Yosef Mizrachi (vide The Times 9 Sep 16, p 17) and many others.