

FIRST Reading: Jeremiah 15.15-21

O LORD, you know;
remember me and visit me,
and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors.
In your forbearance do not take me away;
know that on your account I suffer insult.
Your words were found, and I ate them,
and your words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart;
for I am called by your name,
O LORD, God of hosts.
I did not sit in the company of merrymakers,
nor did I rejoice;
under the weight of your hand I sat alone,
for you had filled me with indignation.
Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?
Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail.

Therefore, thus says the LORD:
If you turn back, I will take you back,
and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
you shall serve as my mouth.
It is they who will turn to you,
not you who will turn to them.

And I will make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,
but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you, says the LORD.
I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked,
and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.

GOSPEL: Matthew 16.21-28

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

Why do bad things happen to good people?

It's an age-old question and I'm not even going to attempt an answer this morning. But just because there isn't an easy answer doesn't mean the question isn't important.

There's a little poem; it goes like this:

The rain it raineth every day upon the just and unjust fella

But mostly on the just because the unjust hath the just's umbrella!

If God is supposedly in charge, why do bad things happen? Why are so many people suffering all over the world right now. Why is life so hard? We try our best to live how God wants us to, and life still hits us really hard.

Sometimes the Bible can come in handy, believe it or not! The Bible can help us find ways to protest against what happens to us, even against God. It doesn't expect us to be completely holy all the

time. We get to be raw and honest, and allow our pain and anger to be expressed.

Jeremiah was one of the best complainers. He did a lot of complaining. And he had a lot to complain about. He was a prophet. For 50 years he told the people what God was saying to them. And they mostly ignored it. They didn't like what he had to say. They preferred to live in happy ignorance of the consequences of their behaviour. They weren't unlike many people in the world today.

So instead of listening and changing their behaviour, they attacked Jeremiah; they traumatised him; they targeted him and imprisoned him. And his protest in the reading today seems completely justified. He accuses God of abandoning him; of setting him up to suffer.

Jeremiah voices his anger and his distress. "You've let me down, God. I did what you said and now look what's happening. You were supposed to be on my side!"

And he voices his utter despair.

Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?

Good question!

Jeremiah voices the questions we all have at some time or other.

Why has this happened to me? What did I do to deserve this? How am I supposed to keep going if this is happening to me? Why did I get this diagnosis? Why did someone I love get so sick? Why is everything going wrong? I'm frightened God. You've let me down. You've abandoned me.

We all want a nice relatively problem free life. We all feel at times that we just want to take the path of least resistance. And it's very easy to try and rope God in to help us pursue our goal. God I just need a nice holiday. God would you provide me with a parking space? And recently, I've been praying this one: God, can you please cool the weather down?! The trouble is, selfishness is

actually not good for us, it's not good for the people around us, and it's not good for our world. There are good reasons why doing something for someone else is good for our own mental health.

Let's think for a moment about our Gospel reading today. Jesus is walking straight towards what we might call a total disaster. And Peter, obviously, thinks it's a mistake.

I've told you this before, but I think it's worth repeating. Jesus doesn't actually call Peter the devil. It's one of those things that get lost in translation. The word he uses, satan, comes from Hebrew and it just means an obstacle. Jesus is basically telling Peter to get out of the way. Jesus has a different agenda, and it isn't the easy option. A nice life is not on the cards. It's not who he is, and it's not why he came.

If we are followers of Jesus, we have to remember it's not God's job to give us easy lives, or to wrap us up in cotton wool so nothing can hurt us. I've been reading news reports about the tragedy that

happened at the Big Church Festival. In the comments there were quite a few people who wanted to know where was God? Why did God do that to his followers? Obviously, the only answer is there isn't a God. But being a follower of Jesus doesn't mean we are immune to bad things happening. We can pray for anything we like, and sometimes those prayers are answered. But God isn't Santa Claus.

Jesus says we have to deny ourselves and take up our cross if we want to follow him. We sometimes need to choose the difficult path, not the path of least resistance. But it's not so we become joyless and miserable. It's not so we feel we've ticked all the boxes and we've done what God wants. It's so that we truly discover who we were designed to be, our true selves. Who we truly are as fragile, sometimes chaotic, broken, sinful, loving, hurting, empathetic and beautiful humans.

It's a strange thing that we have the cross as the symbol of our faith. An instrument of torture. It's also appropriate. We are marked by something

different. We are marked as beloved children of God, the same God who suffered with and for us in Jesus. And the cross becomes true life and peace for us.

Jeremiah got his answer back from God, it seems pretty quickly.

I am with you
to save you and deliver you, says the LORD.

No magic solutions. No instant relief. But an assurance that Jeremiah hasn't been abandoned, whatever he might feel, and whatever he has gone through.

This morning, we will be offering anointing for healing and wholeness, as we do from time to time. There's nothing magic about it. I mean God might do something wonderful for you, but that's not the point. This is a physical reminder that God is present, and because it's done in an atmosphere where we are responding to the Holy Spirit, it can be a powerful and healing experience.

Most of us know what it is like to suffer in one way or another.

I know what it's like to be rushed to hospital in an ambulance suffering a heart attack. I know what it's like to be talked down from a full-on panic attack by a kind nurse.

I also know what it's like to be visited in hospital by my colleague Father Wayne here, and anointed with oil, just as we will be doing today. All I can say is that the fear left me. And I knew that God was present. That's the power of this sacrament, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the caring presence of another human being. It all helps.

The Church of England has guidance around who can or can't receive bread and wine. I often find it quite restricting. But we can anoint anyone with oil. We can bless each one of you. We can share the very real presence of the Holy Spirit with you, even if it's just for a few moments.

So, this morning I want to encourage you to come and receive anointing for healing and wholeness,

whoever you are and whatever you believe or don't believe. Receive the mark of the cross traced on your head and hands in oil, and remember that Jesus also knows what it is to suffer.

I leave you with a prayer from the Northumbria Community.

Lord, you have always given
bread for the coming day;
and though I am poor,
today I believe.

Lord, you have always given
strength for the coming day;
and though I am weak,
today I believe.

Lord, you have always given
peace for the coming day;
and though of anxious heart,
today I believe.

Lord, you have always kept
me safe in trials;
and now, tried as I am,
today I believe.

Lord, you have always marked
the road for the coming day;
and though it may be hidden,
today I believe.

Lord, you have always lightened
this darkness of mine;
and though the night is here,
today I believe.

Lord, you have always spoken
when time was ripe;
and though you be silent now,
today I believe.

Amen.

*Taken from Evening Prayer from Northumbria
Community's Celtic Daily Prayer published by
Collins.*