

The Righteous Branch

Jeremiah has a well-earned reputation for being a prophet of doom. He was known as a right a misery guts, always full of warnings and threats, someone for whom every glass was not so much half-empty as bone dry. And he never wanted to be a prophet in the first place and that added to his general despondency. And then of course there were the circumstances he was living in – both political and personal.

Politically it was a fearful time. It's the beginning of the 6th century BC and Jerusalem is doomed. The army of the Babylonians is at the gates and Jeremiah is convinced that Jerusalem must surrender, and he has been saying so loudly and publicly. So the chapter prior to this one make deeply depressing reading as Jeremiah spells out the fate of the city. That's the political side, but then there is also the personal. Jeremiah is in prison, shut up in the gate-house attached to the royal palace and that is because Jeremiah needs shutting up. Jeremiah's conviction that it's all over and that Jerusalem should give up and throw in the towel has not gone down well with the king and the military. It's bad for morale. And besides, this is God's city is it not? So God will look after it. The temple is where God lives – so God will protect it. Jeremiah is guilty not just of pessimism but blasphemy, of slighting God while claiming to speak for God. And so Jeremiah pays for his pessimism and is slung into jail – and you can just imagine how miserable and pessimistic and doom-laden he must be as he languishes there.

Yet this is where Jeremiah confounds us. Right there, in jail, he portrays a wonderful vision. Suddenly he is talking in hopeful terms: 'in those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David: and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.' Just when all seems lost and Israel is staring into the abyss, Jeremiah discerns hope and a future. Suddenly Jeremiah the doom-merchant, old Bellyache himself, is speaking the language of comfort and promise. We wonder what he had in mind. Who was this righteous Branch that would appear? Apparently it was a king, a descendant of David, and that in itself is surprising coming from Jeremiah. You see, Jeremiah was no fan of the monarchy. As far as he was concerned it was the monarchy that had got the nation into this mess in the first place. There was, after all, a tradition in Israel that the dynasty of the great King David would endure

forever, but that was not a tradition to which Jeremiah would have subscribed. As far as he was concerned the dynasty of David had failed the nation and it had collapsed just as Jerusalem was collapsing all around him. And yet now we have Jeremiah, arch-anti-monarchist, arch-critic of the Davidic dynasty, and he's declaring that a righteous branch will spring from David's line and his presence on the throne will ensure justice and peace throughout the land. The gloomy pessimist is speaking good news.

Let's notice, however, the poetic imagery that Jeremiah uses in this prophecy. Listen to his language. He speaks of a righteous Branch springing up. Consider that image, of a shoot of new life – picture it appearing defiantly on a piece of waste-ground, or maybe budding off the fallen trunk of an old tree. That branch, that shoot, is a gesture of hope in a desolate and deathly landscape. And it's interesting how that image of the shoot, the branch, is used elsewhere in a similar way. There's that glorious passage that we shall read as Christmas approaches, from Isaiah chapter 11. Again, the context is judgement and destruction on Israel and fearful foreboding about the future. But in the midst of it all there comes this promise, 'a shoot shall come forth from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him...' and so on. And that's not the first time Isaiah has used that imagery. Back in chapter 4 of Isaiah there's a dreadful passage about defeat and death and brutality and that has spoken in lurid terms of the stench of death. But suddenly these words break in: 'On that day the Branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel.' There, in the midst of unimaginable death and destruction there appears this beautiful, fruitful Branch. Because that is how God works. That is God's strategy. When all that can be seen, all that can be envisaged is a wasteland and a desert, when all seems lost, a shoot bursts through the ground, a branch springs up, new life emerges that resists. And even the worst pessimist becomes a bearer of hope.

.....

One question that this passage from Jeremiah invites us to consider, on this first Sunday in Advent, is what kind of a future do we anticipate for the world? Are we optimistic or pessimistic? What kind of prospects lie in store for our children and grandchildren? Are we hopeful – or deeply fearful? You see, there is a narrative that we in the West have lived by for some centuries, and it's what we might call a narrative of progress. It's a narrative that in recent times

goes back to what we call the Enlightenment, that era that began in the 17th century and that was conceived in part in the Netherlands, and that was convinced that if only we could get rid of superstition and if we could only enthrone reason and reject irrationality then we would find ourselves on a sure course of progress. War and poverty and ignorance would give way to Liberty, Equality and Fraternity – and I use those terms deliberately as the watchwords of the French revolution which as much as anything embodied these hopes and ideals. And of course the conviction that, given the overthrow of certain obstacles that are currently blocking its path, the world would reach a state of peace and prosperity is what has driven most of the tyrannies of the past centuries, from Marxism to Nazism, as well as benign philosophies such as secular humanism.

Interestingly, though, Christianity has never adopted the narrative of progress. You see, much Christian theology has had at its heart what is called the doctrine of original sin. This is a belief that human beings are fatally and woefully flawed. Based often on a literal reading of the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis, Christian theology has spoken of a deadly twist that is transmitted in human nature. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, we bear the image of God and we are made a little lower than the angels, capable of great things – but we are also estranged from God and seduced by things that are death-dealing rather than life-giving. So we Christians have little hope and confidence in human progress. Yes, of course there has been progress. Science and technology have made life immeasurably easier and life-expectancy, at least in this part of the world, is vastly greater now than even a few generations ago. But technology is double edged and produces drones as well as dialysis machines. And the oceans are being poisoned and species are being eliminated because of human activity – and then there is Paris. And is there not some deep tragic irony that the terrible events of a fortnight ago happened in the city of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality, the city forever associated with the high ideals of the Enlightenment and of progress?

Our problems are legion. Just one example: last week Prince Charles made a link that others have made too between climate change and the war in Syria. The argument is that prolonged drought in regions of Syria has driven people off their land and alienated them and made them ripe recruits for terrorism. And that is an example of a conflict that arises from scarcity. The danger is that as the world's resources are depleted the poor and the

dispossessed will turn increasingly to violence and terrorism in their deep resentment against the wealthy and powerful. Even water may become a resource that is fought over.

So, on this first Sunday in Advent, what of the future? It's hard to be other than pessimistic and fearful – just as Jeremiah was. His faith was no guarantee that everything would turn out alright, far from it. It was no protection against death and destruction. He was deeply pessimistic about the future. And yet he was also profoundly hopeful – and why? Well, because of that Branch. Because of that shoot, appearing from nowhere - fragile, vulnerable, yet injecting new life in the midst of death. Jeremiah of course was only part right. That Davidic King never came – at least as Jeremiah foresaw him. No such Branch sprang up. But as Christians we see the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy in the one whose birth we celebrate in this season. He is the righteous Branch. He is a small, vulnerable, hopeful shoot, a sign of newness and of life, a fragile token of renewal arising in the midst of death and destruction.

One last thing, however. Jeremiah's vision is not just of a new king. The sign of hope prophesied by Jeremiah extends beyond a new king to include the community of God's people. Listen again to verse 16: 'in those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.' You see the king is not enough as a sign of hope. A king needs a people. And note that they are named after him. He is a righteous Branch and they will be called 'The Lord is our righteousness.' In other words there is a family likeness between him and them. There is a family resemblance. And as such they too become a sign of life and hope for the world – as Israel was always intended to be.

So we leave Jeremiah, imprisoned for his gloomy and pessimistic assessment of Jerusalem. His confidence in rulers and in humanity is threadbare. He insists on telling the truth, unpalatable though it is. Jeremiah is no fool and he can read the signs. Yet, strangely, he is a man of great hope for he knows of God's ability to bring branches of new life out of dying trees. He knows about hopeful shoots that spring up in wastelands.

In advent we prepare for the coming of that Branch, that King. But the king is not enough. The king needs a people who bear his name. The king needs a people to be a sign of hope. That is the Advent summons to you and me. Amen.

O advent God,
coming to your world to redeem and reclaim it,
come we pray with righteousness and peace and justice
and bring new life to our dying world.
We pray to day for rulers faced with intractable problems,
faced with the choice of going to war
in the hope of destroying evil, yet aware of the danger
of making things worse.
*Righteous ruler,
may your kingdom come.*

We pray for your church,
planted in the world to be
a sign of hope,
a sign of life,
a fruitful branch,
a fragile shoot.

O God bring new life we pray to your people
that we may bear witness to your rule.

Righteous ruler / may your kingdom come.

O God we pray today for the Mulanje mission Hospital.
We give thanks for the concert here on Friday night
and the money raised.

We give thanks for Ruth and welcome her here
and we pray for her the staff in the hospital.

Bless her when difficult decision have to be made,
guide her when she must administer limited resources,
give her physical and mental and spiritual strength.

O God make it a sign of hope in that land
Of such beauty and possibility and yet such poverty.

Bless, we pray, the land of Malawi.

Bless those who rule and lead them in all righteousness,
that the people may live in peace and prosperity and security.

Righteous ruler / may your kingdom come.

O God these prayers we offer in the name of Jesus,
the righteous branch of David's line. Amen.