

To whom do you belong?

Jeremiah 8:18 – 9:1, Psalm 79: 1-9, 1 Timothy 2:1-10, Luke 16: 1-13

Well, what an odd set of readings we have today!

We continue this week, with the drama of the prophet Jeremiah and his words of judgement. He speaks of the impending calamity that is about to befall Israel because of their idolatry and the betrayal of their covenant with God.

Today we read of Jeremiah's terrible sadness and distress over the sinfulness of the people and the alienation from God that has happened as a consequence. We read of him weeping with his heart torn in two over the broken relationship between Israel and God – *My grief is beyond healing, my heart is broken. Listen to the weeping of my people, it can be heard all across the land.*

Dear Jeremiah, a man after God's own heart, a man who loves his people and wants only what is good for them.

As I reflected upon Jeremiah's distress I couldn't help but wonder: Do our hearts break for those who are estranged from God? Do we weep for those who do not know the love and healing of Jesus?

Jeremiah always asks uncomfortable questions.

We then have the Psalm which continues the theme of judgement. It has within it a tone of pleading for mercy, God it seems, has forgotten his people. Foreign nations have conquered the land and the people of God and have defiled the holy temple – the very heart of worship, prayer, identity and relationship with God. There is a sense that the people of God are overwhelmed, they are in "a desolate wilderness" and in need of salvation.

The psalmist prays for God to take revenge upon the foreign nations – which is a direct contradiction to what Paul teaches Timothy in our New Testament reading! Paul instructs Timothy to pray for the nations and particularly their leaders. More on that later.

There is however a hint within the psalm that Israel is not entirely innocent. How long will you be angry with us?, the psalmist asks.

Perhaps the defilement of the Temple and the conquering of the land have resulted from Israel's infidelity to God. In seeking life and freedom elsewhere, the people of God have invited other powers and principalities into the heart of their homeland and now these destructive powers have taken over. They are indeed in need of salvation.

The gospel reading from Luke 16 is perhaps the strangest of all the readings today. What on earth is the parable of the shrewd manager about?

I have to say that after much reading and reflecting, I still don't know. We have a rich man who has so much wealth he needs to hire someone else to manage it all. In doing so he makes himself vulnerable to both the ability and motivation of the manager, and also abdicates responsibility, at least in part, for the good stewardship of his resources.

The manager who has been hired it seems, has not done his job well. He has, at the least, mismanaged what has been entrusted to him, and at worst been dishonest. He has been careless with what does not belong to him, he has not been a good and trustworthy steward.

When the manager is brought to task over this sorry state of affairs he tries to save his own skin by reducing the amounts that others owed the rich man – thus trying to set up an obligation for them to return the favour in some way.

Perhaps the manager thinks the rich man has overcharged the others anyway, and is only knocking down the debt to a reasonable amount.

Perhaps the amount that the manager has taken off is the interest he himself has added on to the original debt as his own commission. We don't know. Either way, Jesus says, the rich man had to admire the manager for his resourcefulness in making the best of the situation.

I still don't know what the parable really means for our Christian lives. I can observe however, that money, the use and misuse of it, is the foundation of the relationships within the story. It certainly raises the question of how we use our worldly resources, the gifts that God has given us. Do we approach them with a humble attitude of stewardship or an arrogant attitude of ownership and possession? Are our lives and relationships centred upon money or upon God?

We still have another reading to consider though, that of the letter from Paul to Timothy.

This reading begins with the exhortation to pray for all people, friend and enemy, neighbour and stranger, and especially for the leaders of the nations. Our psalmist prays for God's retribution upon the nations, Paul encourages us to uphold them before God. The redeeming, reconciling work of Jesus has made a significant difference in the hearts of God's people. For Paul, no longer do the people of God think in terms of an exclusive, Law bound relationship with God, but a kingdom in which all are welcome, all are considered precious, and all stand in the grace of God.

As Christians we are to pray for all people and especially for those who have responsibility for leading the nations of the world because they need us to intercede for them. All people need to be upheld before God in love and with grace. We need to be praying for leaders with humility, wisdom, compassion and integrity, leaders with a vision for the greater good and not their own selfish ambition.

This reading is a wonderful introduction to our workshop on prayer this afternoon, for it reminds us that prayer is our most vital ministry.

The letter to Timothy then continues with what appears to be some terribly politically incorrect instructions for the behaviour of men and women in worship. At first it looks like Paul is picking on the women because he spends a lot of time focussing on what they are wearing and their general appearance. If you want to be offended by that and dismiss it as old fashioned discrimination you can go right ahead, but I think you will be missing something really important.

Paul is essentially talking about attitudes to worship. When we come into God's presence to worship, to pray, to seek his guidance and wisdom, to rest in his love for us and seek his mercy and grace, what are we bringing with us in our hearts? Are we bringing anger with our brothers and sisters, the bitterness of quarrels and controversies? That's what Paul warns the men about.

Are we worried about our appearance, how attractive we look to others, whether we will be judged by others because of the clothes we are wearing. Are these concerns distracting us from our true purpose in worship? That is Paul's warning to the women.

Now I think both warnings apply to all of us. All of us at times harbour grudges, bitterness and unresolved anger towards our brothers and sisters. All of us are guilty at times of worrying about our outer appearance and focusing upon the image or impression we make upon others.

Paul says there is no place for these things when we come to worship. If we are angry we need to confess it and ask for God's healing and direction for resolving the matter. If we are overly anxious about our outer appearance we need to be reminded that that God loves us for who we are, the real person underneath the clothing and the makeup, the fine suits and the pearls. God is not impressed, nor is God seduced by the trappings of this world.

The readings today then all cause us to reflect upon our relationship with God.

Where are we in our relationship with God today?

Is it a healthy relationship, full of joy and life; or is it strained, dry, distant perhaps?

Do we feel we know Jesus in the depths of our heart; or do we suspect we have never truly met him?

Are our hearts the holy dwelling place for God; or have we given them to something else?

At our recent Synod, Bishop Tom Frame led our morning bible studies and at one point he said: *Our life is not defined by our successes or failures, our achievements or our disappointments, but by our relationship with God.*

Our future does not lie in the false promises of wealth, political security, fame, power, or our own abilities, but in the hands of God – Jesus Christ, who loves us, weeps with us and for us, who forgives, restores, heals and transforms us.

If we weep for those who do not know the life-giving healing love of Christ, then we have a healthy relationship with God.

If we continue to choose Christ and his kingdom over wealth and materialism, then we have a healthy relationship with God.

If we take our calling to the priestly ministry of prayer seriously, and regularly uphold all people, especially those in authority before God, then we have a healthy relationship with God.

And if we continually fail in all these things, take heart. We still stand in God's grace through death and resurrection of Christ.

May we not leave this holy place today without giving thanks and praise for that.

The Lord be with you.