



read the signs of the times

The discussion has started – what to call the decade that is ending in a few days time – the 2010s. We found a name for the previous decade – the noughties – and quite often decades themselves take on a kind of meaning – if I say ‘the 60s’ then it will bring up a particular set of images, music, culture, which would be different from ‘the 70s’ or ‘the 80s’. And the decades we live through often shape us in ways it’s hard to discern but which are influential for the rest of our lives. But what to call the decade that is just ending? The Teens or the Tens have been suggested – although some are being more creative – ‘the Ten-sions’ or the ‘Austeriteens’.

It’s notoriously difficult to, as the Biblical phrase goes ‘*read the signs of the times*’. Especially when you’re living through them. And of course we won’t know the meaning of this decade until years later. It’s like that wonderful Hebrew proverb that pictures us living life as if rowing in a boat on the ocean. The future we can’t see because we’re travelling into it even though it’s behind us – but what we can see is what has just gone before – and we learn to interpret it in time. It’s something that the gospels urge us to do – in the words of Christ – he’s reported as criticising people who seem to be able to predict the weather – to some extent – but can’t read *the signs of the times*, or interpret them.

A decade is an artificial measure – there’s nothing particularly prescient about the passing of 9 into 10 – but if you think back to 2009, going into 2010 – where were you? What were your life circumstances? How would you place a meaning on the last 10

years – and what do the next 10 look like for your life?

During Advent some of us read through some of the chapters of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah. The job of the prophets was not to predict the future like a magician – but precisely this – to *read the signs of the times*. It was a tough Advent read. Jeremiah is relentless; God is pleading with the people, yearning for them to change their ways. Jeremiah is fierce, he slices through the society he was speaking to; the southern kingdom of Judah about 600 years before Christ was born. He is furiously, well, ranting, at the people – that they have turned away from God and their society is unjust, that they have stopped listening to God, they are worshipping other gods, not only named false gods but also ways of life; like greed, waste, and they are making simply the wrong choices in foreign relations, appeasing or forging diplomatic relations with the wrong leaders for the wrong reasons.

And the destruction promised is total, brutal. And the restoration of the people by Yahweh is similarly total, beautiful. There is an utterness about Jeremiah; no half measures; a total outpouring of rage, grief, fury – yes - and also of love, of recovery, of homecoming and deep peace.

What I learned from Jeremiah, even though quite a lot of the imagery and language was almost too much to listen to; it was certainly overwhelming; was that in this Scriptural energy, we’re told that everything is held within the divine gaze, everything takes place within the divine presence; there is, as the

psalm says, no where to go that is outside the presence of God; all the bad stuff as well as all the good stuff; all of life's events take place in the, in Jeremiah's case, deeply anguished presence of God. The 16th century mystic Teresa of Avila puts it best; it is not possible to fall out of the arms of God. Only into them. But that picture doesn't mean that we don't fall in the first place. We do fall. Other times we get up; we make decisions as best we can. We try to read the signs of the times. And the utterness of God's presence encompasses it all, always, everywhere. Certainly not just in church. All day, all night, wherever and whenever we live.

And here in today's gospel of Matthew – the gospel writer who quotes more Hebrew Scripture than any one else – right at the beginning, we have a quotation from Jeremiah. Again the utterness of the language is striking: Rachel *refused to be consoled*. She remains un comforted.

It's a point we often make that straight after Christmas Day – the day of wonder and new beginnings, the day of birth and hope; straight after it, the church keeps some pretty hard core festivals. The very next day, Boxing Day, is the Feast of Stephen – the first Christian martyr, stoned to death witnessed by Paul. The day after is the Feast of John who wrote the gospel, who Jesus told – when you are old, your hands will be bound and you will be led where you don't want to go. And the very next day – yesterday – is the massacre of the innocents – a truly appalling story about Herod becoming afraid of the meaning of Jesus's birth and ordering the killing of all the boys under 2, an event we heard about in our gospel for today.

Why are these days immediately after Christmas so bloody in the calendar of the church? Perhaps it's to stop us becoming too caught up in what can be distracting stories of angels and strange gifts. SO that we are taught that a Christian perspective on the world will always want to delve into mystery

and wonder but will always too have its feet firmly on the ground, in the messy and violent world as it is. What you would call in theological terms transcendence and immanence. Incarnation.

I wonder how you are feeling about 2020? As the number suggests, I wonder if it can be a year of clear sight? In the last decade, our society has seen huge change; not least because of the financial crash of 2008-9 which set up the next years as years of recovery. A reassessment of the internet, realising its dangers as well as its benefits, and a deeper debate about human identity, climate change, inequality, and the effects of globalisation on indigenous populations who felt, and voted, as those who had been 'left behind'. At the end of that decade, our society is facing huge challenges; how we care for our most vulnerable and elderly – the social care system; the reality that many people who have a job, or two jobs or three jobs, still can't make ends meet. And not least the beginning of the healing of divisions over the UK's referendum decision to leave the European Union. There are serious questions to be asked about attitudes towards ethnicity and race, there are deep divisions among us with regard to identity politics. And as a global community, we still face the challenge of climate change.

For this church in central London, how can we be part of the story of God in the world in our own day? Whatever our vocation, it depends both on the eternal presence of God, unchanging, together with an ability to 'read the signs of the times'.

The prophet Jeremiah quoted in today's gospel laid charges against the people of his own day including the huge topic of what in Hebrew teaching is called idolatry. That is, in contemporary thinking – setting out the differing and competing motivations of our lives, recognising them for what they are and making a choice.

Idolatry might sound as if it's a bit of an outmoded concept. But actually it's thoroughly contemporary. Because it causes us to ask ourselves some really fundamental questions. What are the driving motivations in your life? How do you decide where to live, what to spend your money on, who to communicate with, what job to do, when to stop doing something or seeing someone? What are the frameworks, sometimes the unwritten rules that govern our life's direction and shape? And more specifically, *in whose service do you place your energy, your time; to what or to whom do you give your love?* What is it that you believe you can't live without? These are profound questions that require courage to think about at the turn of the year.

In challenging times too, with lots to react to, it's important as a church that we don't busy ourselves with vacuous over activity, believing that we alone, or politics alone, or emotional intelligence alone or therapeutic work alone can change the world. This kind of thinking is equally, in the Biblical term, idolatrous. When we place all our trust in the plans and schemes we have made ourselves, we find that they are as dead-eyed as the statues made by the crowd so criticised by Moses in the desert.

One of the ways in which we can try to express this is by realising that each of us has a Bethlehem – a scene like this – our nativity figures in front of us; that we each of us has a Bethlehem inside us.

Our Bethlehem inside is a place -a still place- a holy and hidden place we approach with wonder and awe, and not a little trepidation. A place of new beginnings and first loves, the place where we remember what we hoped for when we started. It's an uncynical and rather tender place where we know deep down that it's never too late to start again, whatever our age, background, experience or struggles.

Your heart then becomes a chapel, at the same time still and peaceful, and also ablaze with new creative energy. The journey there may be by spending time in silence, or walking on a cliff top or putting yourself in a situation where you are full of awe and wonder.

The church, like any group, like any of us as individuals, can indulge in displacement activity; tackling the obvious things, maybe more concrete things – because the really big things are just too hard.

My prayer for us together in this church St James's in the coming year 2020 and the coming decade is not so much that our communal life will become more active, or more exciting for its own sake; those things may or may not happen; but that our knowledge of God and our commitment to living might deepen – as individuals and together. That together we might learn more and more profoundly that our security is not located in our relationships to each other, or in our hard work, or our status or wealth or even our own visions of the future, however worthy or noble. Our security and purpose is rooted in our acceptance that we are given our name, our life, our direction by God. And that we might know more and more deeply, in a very uncertain and troubling world, that our task - perhaps our only task - is to put our hand in the hand of God and step into the unknown. (*cf The Gate of the Year* Minnie Louise Haskins 1875-1957)

Reading the signs of the times will need as close to 2020 vision for a year that will bring enormous challenges to us as a society.

And there is no way for a Christian community to become clear sighted without committing itself to prayer – every week in this service for example- to return to the source of our life in Christ – and like Jeremiah, pray in the knowledge that everything – all the tragedy, joy, confusion, hubris, fury and violence – all

of it – is held in the clear sighted gaze of God who sees us and everything as it really is.

Some of you will know that I trained to be a priest at an ecumenical college where Methodists were in the majority (Queen's College Birmingham). One of the many things I learned from Methodism was that at this time of year, Methodist churches hold their

covenant services – a service of dedication that uses a beautiful prayer called the Covenant prayer written by John Wesley, who in addressing God with his hopes and fears for the future helps us do the same. And so as this year ends and another one begins, I end this sermon with the prayer – and if you would like to, as you hear the words, do pray it with me.

I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will,
Put me to doing, put me to suffering;
Let me be employed for you
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you, or brought low for you;
Let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal,
and now glorious and blessed God, you are mine and I am yours.
So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.