

Lectionary Readings: **Jeremiah 11: 1-14**
 Psalm 53
 Romans 13: 1-10
 Luke 9: 51-62

The passage from Jeremiah this week returns to a familiar theme. Through the Prophet, the Lord is reminding the people of Judah of three things:

1. The Covenant promises given to them when they were led out of Egypt;
2. The terms of this Covenant and the penalties, the ‘curse’ of not obeying the Lord;
3. The current state of their adherence, or lack of adherence, to the Lord.

It is clear from the latter part of the passage that the people of Judah (and also Israel) have actively turned away from the Lord – *“They have returned to the sins of their ancestors; they have followed other gods to serve them”*; they have set up many altars to many gods and burn incense on them (*“You, Judah, have as many gods as you have towns; and the altars you have set up to burn incense to that shameful god Baal are as many as the streets of Jerusalem”*).

Two verses stand out for us – as they should have done for the people of Judah:

- ³Tell them that this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: “Cursed is the one who does not obey the terms of this covenant – ⁴the terms I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.”
 I said, **“Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God.**

There is a great contrast between society today and the people of Judah – they were actively seeking and worshipping other gods; the attitude to ‘God’ today is perhaps best described as one of apathy.

I have been reminded of this over the past week – we have been in Kent having a very inexpensive few days away (a house swap with Jackie’s brother and his wife!). For us it was a return to the area where we first met when we were both teaching at Cranbrook School and for me it was also a return to what was then the Tunbridge Wells Circuit. Driving around, revisiting old haunts, the former Methodist churches seen - ones which I had known and where I had taken services - was very noticeable. As in our own Circuit, numbers and attendance in some rural societies decrease(s) as the membership becomes ever older until there comes the inevitable closure and disposal of the premises.

For us today the promises of the Lord are still there – if we obey and follow Him as He wills. There is also the implicit warning that if we turn from Him and follow our own inclinations He will reject us, as He did the people of Judah. The final verse of our reading confirms this:

- ¹⁴ ‘Do not pray for this people or offer any plea or petition for them, because I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their distress.

Or as ‘The Message’ expresses this verse:

- ¹⁴ “And as for you, Jeremiah, I don’t want you praying for this people.
 Nothing! Not a word of petition. Indeed, I’m not going to listen to a single syllable of their crisis-prayers.”

Psalm 53 is headed:

For the director of music. According to *mahalath* (which we are told in a footnote is probably a musical term).
A *maskil* of David. (a *maskil* is also likely to be a musical – or perhaps literary – term).

The introduction to this psalm in the NIV Study Bible tells us that it is a testimony concerning the folly of evil men and is a somewhat revised duplicate of Psalm 14 (see verses 4-6 of Psalm 53 compared to verses 4-7 of Psalm 14 below):

- ¹ The fool^[a] says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’
 They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.
- ² The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.
- ³ All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.
- ⁴ Do all these evildoers know nothing?
 They devour my people as though eating bread; they never call on the LORD.
- ⁵ But there they are, overwhelmed with dread, for God is present in the company of the righteous.
- ⁶ You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge.
- ⁷ Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!
 When the LORD restores his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!

Footnotes

- a. Psalm 14:1 The Hebrew words rendered *fool* in Psalms denote one who is morally deficient.

The revision of Psalm 14 may have come about at the time of an event such as that narrated in 2 Chronicles 20 – *Jehoshaphat Defeats Moab and Ammon* – a vast army had come against Jehoshaphat but the Spirit of the Lord came on Jahaziel the son of Zechariah, a Levite and descendant of Asaph:

¹⁵ He said: 'Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you:
"Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. **For the battle is not yours, but God's.**"

2 Chronicles 20 goes on to record the victory over the invading armies; the triumphant return to Jerusalem and the effect this victory had on the surrounding kingdoms:

²⁷ Then, led by Jehoshaphat, all the men of Judah and Jerusalem returned joyfully to Jerusalem, for the LORD had given them cause to rejoice over their enemies.

²⁸ They entered Jerusalem and went to the temple of the LORD with harps and lyres and trumpets.

²⁹ The fear of God came on all the surrounding kingdoms when they heard how the LORD had fought against the enemies of Israel.

³⁰ And the kingdom of Jehoshaphat was at peace, for his God had given him rest on every side.

We can note that 'God' is used in Psalm 53 whereas Psalm 14 uses 'The Lord' in the equivalent verses.

A further comment on **mahalath** – the Hebrew appears to be the word for "suffering" or "sickness". There is a suggestion that the Psalm was possibly used at a time of affliction, e.g. when the godless mock.

The Daily Study Bible comments that this psalm is about a very sad fact of human life, that many people take it for granted that God doesn't matter. They say: "Oh yes, I suppose there is a God – but what difference does that make?"

This fallacy is both ancient and modern. In OT times virtually nobody was an atheist. Life was too mysterious for them to make that foolish mistake.

(We have seen, from Jeremiah, that the OT people actively sought many gods and we have made the contrast with the apathy of the modern, secular world.)

The message conveyed in our Romans 13 passage is one that, we, living in a democratic society, can follow although we may not agree with Paul when he states "*the authorities which exist have been established by God*".

Acceptance of secular authorities and their right to rule does not, of course, prevent us from quietly working for change where that is thought to be desirable or necessary. History has many, many, examples of Christian leadership in bringing about radical reform in the political life of this and other nations.

One wonders how Paul's teaching applies to a number of countries we could name in the world today – those autocratic states where any contrary view is likely to be harshly or violently quashed – states such as China, North Vietnam, Russia and Belarus.

The clear message we can take for this reading comes in verses 8-10:

Love fulfils the law

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for **whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.**

⁹ The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,'^[a] and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command:

'Love your neighbour as yourself.'^[b]

¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.

Footnotes

a. [Romans 13:9](#) Exodus 20:13-15,17; Deut. 5:17-19,21

b. [Romans 13:9](#) Lev. 19:18

It is interesting that Paul is quoting from the Old Testament – he is making the point that "**Love fulfils the Law**".

We remember that Jesus said He had not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfil them. We also remember His teaching centred on Love – "To love God with the utmost of our ability and to love those around us as we **love ourselves**".

Loving our neighbours, **as we love ourselves** – what a powerful image for the world! Let us pray that we can make a start by bringing it to fruition in our lives.

Our Gospel reading from Luke is in two halves – "**Samaritan opposition**" and "**The cost of following Jesus**".

We are told in verse 51 that "*Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem*". Was it knowledge of this intention that turned the inhabitants of the Samaritan village against Him. James and John were clearly offended by the refusal of the village people to welcome Him and knowing the power available to Jesus (no doubt thinking with traditional Jewish/Samaritan enmity) they enquired if fire should be called down from heaven to destroy the village. (In some manuscripts James and John recall Elijah calling down fire from heaven – presumably in the contest with Baal on Mount Carmel.)

Remembering what we have just been reading about 'love', Jesus rebukes His disciples and then moves on to another, hopefully more welcoming, village.

The second half of the reading is challenging – **what is the cost of following Jesus for us?**

There are three examples given. In the first, a man comes to Jesus saying “*I will follow you wherever you go*”. When Jesus replies saying “He has no home, no base, His is an itinerant ministry” we are not told the outcome for the man who came with that extensive promise. The impression that one takes from the Gospel is that he went away and did not follow Jesus – deterred by the reply he had received.

The second man, in contrast, is called by Jesus to “*Follow Him*”. He sounds willing but first wants to go and bury his father – was this reality or just an excuse to avoid following Jesus? “*Let the dead bury their own dead*” sounds harsh – Jesus is really telling the man to take his sights off everyday human matters. He obviously sees something in this man – apart from calling him in the first place, He now tells him to “*go and proclaim the kingdom of God*”.

In the third example another man offers to follow Jesus but wants, first, to go and say goodbye to his family:

⁶² Jesus replied, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.’

This brings us back to that question - **what is the cost of following Jesus for us?**

We have that image of the ploughman and the straight furrow he is producing. He looks ahead - constant looking back at the furrow already produced, will result in something that is not straight or true.

Do we constantly look ahead – to Jesus – or are we always looking back to events or experiences from the past?

All my hope on God is founded:
he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

Human pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray our trust;
what with care and toil we fashion,
tower and temple fall to dust.
But God’s power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.

God’s great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom passing thought;
splendour, light and life and attend him,
beauty springeth out of nought.
Evermore
from his store
new-born worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty giver
bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth,
pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand
at his hand;
Joy doth wait on his command.

Still from earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call
one and all
ye who follow shall not fall.

Robert Bridges

Based on Joachim Neander.

Captain of Israel’s host, and Guide
of all who seek the land above,
beneath your shadow we abide,
the cloud of your protecting love;
our strength, your grace; our rule, your word;
our end, the glory of the Lord.

By your unerring Spirit led,
we shall not in the desert stray;
we shall not full direction need,
nor miss our providential way;
as far from danger as from fear,
while love, almighty love, is near.

Charles Wesley