

Reproach and Derision

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Romans 6:1-11

Matthew 24:39

The Queen is one of us: she is an Anglican. Twenty six of our Bishops sit by right in the House of Lords with direct access to members of the Government. It is easy for us as Anglicans to suppose that church and state are seamlessly linked, almost as if they were the same organization.

Today's readings remind us that that is not how it always was and indeed not necessarily how it ought to be. In fact the story of Jeremiah is one of his continual conflict with the state and the religious establishment.

According to Jeremiah himself he was twenty years old when he was called by the Lord to be a prophet. In his case this meant warning those around him about their behaviour. This is expressed in terms of religious idolatry and the worship of false gods:

They have turned back to the iniquities of their ancestors of old, who refused to heed my words; they have gone after other gods to serve them; the house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken the covenant that I made with their ancestors.

Jeremiah 11:10

It is hard to interpret this for our own time. We do not readily worship other gods or images. But perhaps we can reformulate it in terms that we do understand: Jeremiah is protesting about a nation which has adopted values that are not those of the Lord; and he is protesting about a dangerous foreign policy – for false gods are completely associated with other nations. To worship a false god is to ally oneself with a foreign and unsympathetic nation. The message is both spiritual and political.

Jeremiah received two kinds of responses. First there were those false prophets who offered an alternative message: all is well, there is nothing to worry about. And then there was the response of the crowds and the religious leaders who reviled him:

For I hear many whispering: "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him."

Jeremiah 20:10

Jeremiah was not a popular man and in these words Christians will hear a parallel with Jesus.

And Jesus would undoubtedly have seen Jeremiah as a precedent. Jeremiah and Jesus both spoke out the truth. Jeremiah and Jesus both suffered persecution for their honesty. Jeremiah and Jesus both trusted the Lord to see them through.

In today's gospel reading Jesus tells his disciples that they in their turn will need to emulate both himself and Jeremiah. They, we, must be honest:

What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.

Matthew 24:27

They, we, will face persecution:

For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Matthew 24:35

They, we, must trust the Lord:

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Matthew 24:39

So where does the former leader of the Liberal Democrat Party fit in with this? Is Tim Farron a Jeremiah, persecuted for his faith? Some people have even asked the question whether it is possible for a Christian to be a leader of any mainstream political party.

The answer to the second question has to be a clear yes - it is possible. The evidence for this is simple: the Prime Minister is a Christian in the sense that she claims to be one and is a regular church worshipper. Exactly the same was true for Tony Blair. David Cameron was an Anglican in name and Gordon Brown referred to faith as a 'moral compass' and according to The Guardian is a member of the Church of Scotland. For the last twenty years we have had Christian Prime Ministers.

The issue that separated Tim Farron from his party was that of gay sex. What is significant here is that not only is Tim Farron a Christian but he is also described as a conservative evangelical. Now one of the purposes of public scrutiny, especially in a General Election, is to root out inconsistencies in political statements, even hypocrisy. So, for example, Jeremy Corbyn was quizzed in public debates about his views on the renewal of the Trident missile system – he has in the past opposed it while the party he leads supports it. Such quizzing is quite proper.

And there is clearly a tension in Tim Farron's own life. The Liberal Democratic Party has been very strong in its support of gay rights; but the part of the Christian church to which Tim Farron belongs has been very outspoken in the opposite direction. Is there an inconsistency here? Is there hypocrisy? It is a legitimate question.

Tim Farron actually voted in Parliament in favour of equal marriage so his public position is in line with that of his political party. But the questions were about his views on the morality of gay sex, not about the law. Morality and law are not identical. The answer the Mr Farron gave was that he did not think it was sinful. But he prevaricated. He tried to avoid giving an answer. He did not say those words readily. He did not want to say them because he knew he was contradicting the position taken by conservative evangelical Christianity. It is possible he may even have said something he did not believe himself.

What he said of his resignation was that:

To be a political leader – especially of a progressive, liberal party in 2017 – and to live as a committed Christian, to hold faithfully to the Bible's teaching, has felt impossible for me.

What we can conclude from this is that to be leader of the Liberal Democrat Party and be a conservative evangelical Christian involves tensions relating to policy on sexuality; furthermore those tensions were too great for Tim Farron to deal with. Others may have been better able to deal with that tension. Others may have not felt the tensions at all.

In fact, many Christians would agree with Liberal Democrat line on gay sexuality. Indeed the Anglican Church in Scotland has recently agreed to celebrate same sex marriages. When Theresa May was asked whether she thought gay sex was a sin she gave a straight reply: No. Such an answer closed down any further discussion. But given that Tim Farron felt he had to make a choice he made the right one. Jeremiah would have applauded him.

Farron finished by saying it must have taken something incredible for him to give up being leader of the party he loved. It must, then, have been something: "so amazing, so divine, it demands my soul, my life, my all". These words, quoted by Farron are taken from the Isaac Watts hymn 'When I survey the wondrous cross'. They make it very clear that Tim Farron put loyalty to Christ before loyalty to a secular consensus. Whether he interpreted Christ's calling correctly is another matter.

His decision raises important questions for all of us. Politics and faith do not exist in separate worlds. The Christian faith has something to say about the world of politics. And it is quite possible that for us, just as much as for Jeremiah, there are issues where secular consensus and our faith come into conflict and we have to make a choice. So where are the differences? Is it gay sex? Is it abortion? Or nuclear missile systems? Or foreign aid? Austerity? Welfare? Equality? Racism?

What do you read in the gospels?

N Clews

18th June 2017

but readings for 25th June 2017