

24<sup>th</sup> March 2019

Preacher: John Lampard

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Hymns:     **55**     **Immortal, invisible, God only wise**  
              **164**     **Your words to me are life and health**  
              **416**     **There's a wideness in God's mercy**  
              **357**     **Jesus - the name high over all**

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Readings:  **1Corinthians 10:1-13**  
              **Luke 13:1-9**

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## **STICK and CARROT - WARNING AND PROMISE**

We are all aware of the two most used parallel tools of management and control, whether in business, school or home, and even in the most recent European Union negotiations, the stick and the carrot. One is to goad us on, or warn us of consequences, that's the stick. The other is to encourage us on, and to reward us. That's the carrot. It's unfortunate if you don't like carrots, you will have to substitute in your mind some treat you do like! The stick is for warning, the carrot for promise.

Our journey together through the 40 days of Lent parallels both Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness but also Jesus' journey to Jerusalem to the cross and to resurrection. Jesus' journey was one that contained both warnings and promise, his own warnings that he would be going to his death on the cross and the cost of discipleship, but also the promise of resurrection life. Warning and promise. Stick and carrot.

And these two themes run through the Epistle and the Gospel for today.

In the Corinthians passage, Paul reminds his listeners about the Exodus from Egypt of the children of Israel. The Exodus from Egypt and entry into the Promised Land was THE seminal experience for all Jewish believers then and today. We can read the details in the OT book of Exodus.

Here Paul reminds his readers of the story and points out that the promise of God that he would lead his people to the Promised Land, his carrot. This was accompanied by four signs, four miraculous events, ones I'm sure you are familiar with. And you are familiar with them because they evoke and actively fill and nourish our spiritual journeys today.

First, as they journeyed they had no map or compass to guide them through the desert, but they were led by a cloud that went before them. We evoke it for ourselves whenever we sing, 'Guide me O thou great Redeemer, pilgrim through this barren land.' God is in the unknown cloud that goes before us.

Second, Paul reminds his readers of the crossing of the Red Sea, or as I'm sure you know, the Reed Sea, not the Red Sea we see on maps today. When Jen pours water into the font at a baptism there is the symbol that we safely journey through the waters of death into the new baptised life in Christ. We may not see the waters

piling up either side of the font and the one baptised, but the promise and symbolism of new life is there.

Then Paul speaks about the miracle of manna, this mysterious food which appeared every morning and which both delighted the Israelites, and fed them for the day.

And last there was water that flowed from the rock in the dry desert to quench their thirst. These two symbols, manna and water, Paul interprets as the equivalence for us as being the spiritual sustenance of bread and wine when we dine with Christ. And when we are fed by him.

The experience of the Children of Israel, as they journeyed was very much that of being led on by the carrot, God's actions and assurance that they were journeying to the Promised Land. But there was also stick. As we read, Paul reminded the Corinthians 'God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. No one who left Egypt entered the Promised Land, it was their descendants. Paul goes on to admonish the Corinthians. 'We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer'. The stick.

Then Paul offers the carrot, 'God is faithful and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength'. I must admit I do struggle with those words – not because I have in no way been tested almost to destruction – but have we not all seen those who have?.....and yet, and yet.....

When I think of stick and carrot, warning and promise I cannot help remembering a member of one of my churches, very early in my ministry. We were in inner-city Leeds, and I had a small church of elderly, faithful people. Mary was a no nonsense Northerner. She always wore the same clothes, a long black coat, and a black hat jammed on her head – you may remember Grandma in the old Giles cartoons. One evening Mary was at a bus-stop in central Leeds, when she was approach by a very dishevelled and very drunk man. 'Can you direct me to the Crypt?' The Crypt was a well-known centred for homeless men and those suffering with alcohol and substance abuse. Mary realised that, in his state, he would not be able to follow directions, so, as she had a few minutes before her bus she said she would lead him there. As Mary later told me, 'I was a bit nervous, but I gave him a piece of my mind, he was obviously well educated, and I told his in no uncertain terms that he was ruining his life.' He staggered into the Crypt and Mary returned to catch her bus home.

Many weeks later she was waiting at the same bus stop when a smartly dressed man looked at her, turned to her and said, 'Are you the lady who showed a drunk to the Crypt?' 'Yes', she said, and she recognised him. 'I just want to thank you for saving my life. I took your words to heart, and as I entered the Crypt I vowed I would turn my life round. I had lost my job, my wife had turned me out and my family had disowned me.'

'All that has now changed. I've been looking for you for weeks. Can I invite you home to meet my family?' In due course Mary visited them and they fell upon her with gratitude for saving their father. She became a regular visitor, a sort of honorary aunt. Mary, by God's grace had offered a stick, her warning to him, but also the promise of

leading him personally to the Crypt. It's the sort of story I would hardly have believed, if I had not known Mary.

Perhaps it raises for all of us the question. Are we in a life situation where we need the warning of the stick, or the awareness of the grace of the carrot?

Let's turn now to the Gospel passage. The story of the unproductive fruit tree. The owner wanted to cut it down as it was a waste of space, the gardener said 'I'll give it special care and attention to see if I can help it to fruit. Dug, fertilized, he cared for it, to give it a last chance.

Now there is one thing that Jeremy Corbin, the leader of the Opposition, and I have in common, apart from white hair and a beard. That is, we both love working on our allotments. I love tending and caring for our fruit bushes, gooseberry, currant and raspberries. Over the last few weeks I have been working in the fruit cage among apparently lifeless and bare fruit trees. I've been pruning, digging, coaxing them with barrow loads of manure, weeding and caring for them. I'll tell you the results in the Summer, but I think they are responding.

In this story, the care and loving attention of the gardener (and I hope the imagery of the gardener resonates with you) is a symbol and a promise of God in Christ working in our lives. Like the bedraggled fruit trees, we are not a promising looking lot, we too can look as though we are a waste of space, both as individuals and as a Christian community in a secular world. And the warning is that if we do not display the fruits of the Spirit we do deserve to be cut down or pulled up.

But we have the Gardener. One who loves us and cares for us until the end. That is his gracious promise. Even as you sit here may your roots, the roots of your faith begin to feel that Spring fever, that urge to grow, to develop to fruit, tended always by the Gardener. Whose promise is not only that he will tend us, but also, as he journeys to Jerusalem will lay down his life for us.