

8th September 2019

Preacher: Steven Cooper

Hymns: **677** **Christ is made the sure foundation**
 332 **Lord, I lift your name on high**
 667 **O Watcher in the wilderness**
 681 **Community of Christ, who make the Cross your own**
 470 **Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided**

Readings: **Jeremiah 18:1-11**
 Psalm 139
 Luke 14:25-33

“God’s builders and planters”

Unblock our ears, unlock our hearts, truly to hear your word.

Lord, may the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable to you, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Thank you all very much for your warm welcome last Sunday. It really is a delight and a privilege to be joining you in ministry here at Wesley’s Chapel & Leysian Mission. Now, this probably isn’t the first time you’ve heard such words uttered from this pulpit: but, wow. What a week. Where shall my wondering soul begin?

Perhaps with Jeremiah. ‘The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.”’

With my new study just outside to the left at 47A City Road, amongst those of you who are familiar with the recent history of ministerial succession here at Wesley’s Chapel, some might say that, following colleagues Judith and Sally, I have taken up occupancy in the Potter’s house... and I pray that there, I may be allowed to hear the Lord’s words.

I feel that this week, though, the Lord is speaking loud and clear, through the scripture passages that we have appointed for today.

It is not news that we are living in a tumultuous and uncertain time in the life of our nation; but the past week seems to have exceeded even all that has come before, in terms of the extent of political upheaval at the centre of our national life. I dare not predict what the next chapter will be. I will be talking a bit this morning about our nation—by which I mean the United Kingdom—because we are experiencing a particularly extraordinary time here at present; but what we will be thinking about will have resonance with many different contexts the world over.

Here in the UK, at the heart of our current parliamentary turmoil is a set of conflicts, between on the one hand integrity, reason, and the common good; and on the other, unscrupulousness, crude populism, and a dogmatism that defies reason.

As a side note, I noted the death of Robert Mugabe on Friday with special interest. Zimbabwe is a place that is very close to my heart. My mum spent 10 years working for the Methodist Church there before I was born, and I have grown up with many Zimbabwean friends, and a sense that Zimbabwe is part, in some way, of my own story. With much sadness, I have followed the trajectory of Zimbabwe's political misfortunes over the past twenty years closely. In fact it so happened that I was in Zimbabwe on the night in November 2017 when the head of the Zimbabwean army entered the State House in Harare, placed Mugabe under house arrest, and brought his 37 years of rule to its close—though that's a story for another time.

One of the things Mugabe did during his time in office was to force through a change to the country's constitution, that made him Executive President, giving him power to impose his destructive agenda upon the country, unchecked (as it had been) by parliament. Recent developments in our own political life, with plans to suspend parliament to try and facilitate a reckless and dangerously destructive agenda—while some may find this comparison difficult to swallow—are uncannily reminiscent of the kind of shenanigans that were a defining feature of Mugabe's misrule.

In the midst of such conflicts, what is to become of our nation, as it spins like the clay on a potter's wheel? And what role do we have to play in shaping what that might be?

The first thing we can say is that we certainly *have* a role in shaping what is to become of the clay that is our nation and our national life.

God spoke to Jeremiah about how prone his nation was to be built and to grow, or to be broken down and destroyed, depending upon the actions and attitudes of its people. If we take Jeremiah's words literally, he presents God as the one who will, Godself, do the plucking up and destroying or the building and planting. But we should be wary of taking too literally words that are themselves told in the context of an image and a metaphor, in this case of the clay upon the wheel.

Notwithstanding some of the stories that are told of God's work in the earliest parts of the Bible, God, by and large, is not a god who reigns physically above us and intervenes in the world in the manner of the gods of Greek mythology, smashing things with terrible lightning bolts or raining down fire. But God is active in human hearts, and in the social and political systems through which human beings relate to one another.

A fortnight ago, John Lampard gave you the outline of the political situation of Jeremiah's time, and how the disaster that was to befall Jeremiah's nation was in

fact in the form of a military takeover by hostile human forces, with Judah's fall to Babylon in 587BC. And indeed we see, through the history of the Old Testament, God warning God's people time and again of the consequences of failing to live as a community of holiness and justice in the way that God has instructed; and the experience of those consequences as national fracturing and weakness, and succumbing to be overthrown by stronger, more organised forces—Babylonians, Assyrians and others—who have their own alternative vision for how life is to be lived in that land.

In much of the Old Testament, we see God's people seeking to make sense of this as God's doing—as God's punishment for their misdeeds. And in a sense this is how Jeremiah presents it in the image of the clay upon the potter's wheel. But at root, God is warning about what are inevitably the consequences for society when justice breaks down, when selfishness takes over, and when the bonds that hold community together and make for shared flourishing fall apart. Those consequences—that breaking down and destroying of the clay—are ultimately experienced in the context of human affairs, and at through the activity of those human hands that would do the nation harm. Where Jeremiah speaks of *God* plucking up and breaking down and destroying, that is what that really looks like in practice.

But likewise, where Jeremiah speaks of God building and planting a nation, when that nation is living according to the attitudes of holiness and justice that God demands, well it is human hands—hands through which God is nonetheless at work—that do that building and that planting: that building of relationships, that planting of institutions that provide for the needs of all, the growth of shared life and mutual support within the human family.

And that's where we come in. At this present time of political turmoil, each of us has the capacity to contribute to the breaking down and destruction of our shared life as a nation, or to contribute to the building and planting of reconciliation, of restored relationships, of a positive vision of what we can be as the human family: committed to integrity, attentive to reason (itself, a gift of God) and to the common good.

But that, I dare say, is easier said than done. It is difficult because we live at present often in very close relationships with others who do not see things that way. We live alongside some who are so affected by cynicism that they rejoice at political leaders being prepared brazenly to lie and connive in order to get their agenda through. And to reject such cynicism, to stand for the Godly virtues of reason and integrity, to insist on that different vision that God calls us to pursue, can at times bring our relationships with those who are close to us into real tension.

And no one makes this clearer than Jesus does, in the words we have heard this morning from Luke's gospel. It can be difficult. “Whoever comes to me and does

not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

Now, ‘hate’ is a very strong word. And in this context, it is perhaps an unhelpful word to which for us to become too attached. We should remember that Jesus did not speak in our language, but in Aramaic. As an Aramaic-speaker, the language Jesus used was always very direct, in a way that, in translation for us, can sometimes seem excessively harsh. Aramaic, like the Hebrew of the Old Testament, is a very direct language; it doesn’t lend itself to the communication of nuance in the way that English can. When Jesus wanted to communicate in a nuanced way, he did so by telling stories and parables.

Some of you may have seen the excellent recent drama series *Chernobyl* on the television. It has been highly praised for the authenticity with which it dramatizes the events surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986. And this goes particularly for the dialogue spoken by the characters. In the programme, they are speaking English, but representing characters who in real life would have been speaking Russian; as such, they constantly speak—although, as it were, in translation—in a way that is very direct and blunt, because that is how native Russian-speakers tend to speak. We experience a similar phenomenon in our English Biblical translation, itself of an original Greek translation, of how Jesus spoke.

This word, ‘hate’, therefore—while it is doubtless correct as a literal translation of Jesus’s words—can jar with us in English in a way that can perhaps distract us from the real essence of what Jesus is saying. Jesus is really taking about priorities. He is talking about the tension that may arise between the familial ties and our attachments to the things that are close to us, and the calling of Christian discipleship. It would not be improper for us, in this context, to think of this word ‘to hate’ father and mother, brothers and sisters, etc, more as ‘to disregard’—when the call of Christ, the call to stand for what is right, requires us to go a different way.

And, boy, have we seen something of that in Parliament this week. I’m not just talking about the resignation of the Prime Minister’s own brother from parliament, because of what he himself described as the ‘unresolvable tension’ as brother of our Prime Minister ‘between family loyalty and the national interest’. Even before that took place on Thursday, there were remarkable developments in parliament this week that reflect much the same kind of tension.

I myself am a member of a political party, and have at times been quite politically active—not with the party of our government, though that’s not my point here. I know that, particularly for those who are very active politically, parliamentarians most especially, a political party really can be like a family, and a group of people with whom one has a deep sense of personal bond and kinship. I also know that the vast majority of parliamentarians, despite what the cynicism of popular opinion sometimes

suggests, are deeply committed to the common good, though they may differ over what the common good is, or how it is best achieved.

And this week we have seen that tension between what you could think of as like a family loyalty to their party and a deep concern for the common good, realised in the example of those twenty-one long-standing Conservative MPs who took a stand against what they perceived to be the profoundly destructive consequences of a no-deal Brexit and voted against their party—*having been told* that they would be cut off from that party, that family, if they were to do so. They forsook, disregarded those bonds, because they were committed to something even more important, in spite of how important those bonds undoubtedly are to them.

And then indeed we have Jo Johnson—as several commentators have put it, stepping down from politics in order to spend less time with his family. And most recently, last night, the resignation of Amber Rudd—not only from the government, but from her own party.

When we see developments such as these, even in the arena of secular political affairs, it puts Jesus' words into perspective. Just as for these politicians, who standing for the greater good has placed their family bonds (literal or figurative) under real strain, even to breaking point—well for us too, as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ, tensions that arise with those who are closest to us, in consequence of our discipleship, can be very real. And that tension, more often than not, revolves around two fundamentally different ways of looking at the world and at our neighbours: a way that is characterized by cynicism, distrust and suspicion of others; and a way that celebrates others, sees them with hope, and approaches people with an instinctive attitude of trust.

The latter is what Jesus demands of us. And it is the approach by which we can be builders and planters in our society today. With regard to the incredible fractiousness and upheaval that is going on in parliament at the moment, Margaret Beckett—one of the longest-serving MPs—said the other day that at heart what has broken down are the essential relationships of trust (even transcending part lines) upon which the normal functioning of government and parliament are based. And within our society as a whole, it is the breaking down of attitudes of trust and hope, that underlies the bitterness and divisions that characterise our present time, and which each of us can play a part in rebuilding.

That attitude of trust is founded, for us as Christians, on the recognition that each one of our neighbours—just as we are—is, in the words of our psalm, 'fearfully and wonderfully made' in God's sight. As the community of the Church, it's an attitude that we model in how we look at one another: called as we are, as members of Christ's body, to recognise something of a reflection of Christ in each other's face. It's an attitude that is reflected in how we are called to welcome the stranger: in the

words of Hebrews chapter 13, 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.'

All of this represents a way of approaching the world around us, in which we can find ourselves in real tension with those who do not see things in this way. But it is an approach which, in Christ, we are called to maintain with boldness and with courage. 'But what about reconciliation?', you may say. 'Aren't you talking unhelpfully, Steven, in terms of the conflict, or the tension, between one approach and the other?' We shall focus further on reconciliation in future sermons. We shall think further too, in future sermons, as I know you regularly do, about the social injustices that help to feed the destructive attitudes about which I have spoken. But it is important, uncomfortable as it may be, for us to recognise that the conflict, the tension I have been talking about is a real one. It is reflective of the tension of which Jesus very clearly speaks in his words about what it is to be his disciple. And we do nothing to achieve reconciliation by denying, or avoiding, the existence of the problem.

One of the things you will come to discover about me is that the ecumenical religious Community at Taizé in France is a place of great significance to me. It is a community that has reconciliation at the core of its DNA. And its founder, Roger Schutz, who came to be known as Brother Roger, spoke a great deal about the significance of trust, at the heart of how as Christians we are to approach, and to shape, the world in which we are placed. This is something of what he wrote, to his own Community in Taizé:

"If everything began with a heart that trusts, who could still say, 'What am I doing on this earth?'

For trust to rise up all across the world, in the East and the West, in the North and the South, your life and the lives of a great many people are necessary.

If a passion for forgiveness were ablaze within you, then you could kindle sparks of communion even in the darkest days of nations.

The experience of a whole lifetime is not necessary in order to begin.

Do not forget that, in the most difficult periods of history, very often a small number of women, men and young people, and even children, spread out over the earth, were able to change the course of certain historical developments. Persevering in communion with Christ in prayerful waiting or in a life of contemplation, they were an invisible ferment of reconciliation among believers and non-believers.

At present, too, there are people who have all they need to transform situations that have become rigid. Leaving behind the age of mistrust, or even suspicion, they have all they need to create an era of trust and of reconciliations.

Eagerly longing for divisions to be healed, they stand in the midst of humanity as signs of what we could never have hoped for.

They can be recognized. They have been fashioned by times of inconceivable trial. They persevere in spite of everything, in spite of all that cannot be changed.

By the gift of their lives, they show that human beings were not created for hopelessness.

For them, although there are walls to be demolished, there is above all a 'unique source' where the courage for new beginnings can be found again and again."

Christ calls us to, if we need to, to disregard father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, as part of what it is to be his disciple. Christ calls us to take up our cross, and follow him. But in all this, Christ—who overcame death—gives us the courage, gives us the vision that we need. By God's inexhaustible grace, in the words of our Covenant Service, 'the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.'

As this nation spins like clay on a potter's wheel: let us be people of trust, whatever it takes. Let us be people of hope. Let us be the hands through which God will build and plant this nation, and this world once again. Amen.