

First Sunday after Trinity 2015 (Evensong)

(7.06.15)

Jeremiah 6: 16 – 21; Romans 9: 1- 13

It may not surprise you to learn that there have been occasions in the course of the last 15 years when I have wondered why I spent three years of my life sitting in a law library trying to read the tortuously long, yet perfectly structured sentences in which legal judgments are written. But all became clear to me when I read Romans 9: 1 – 13 when what sprang into my mind was the dictum of Lord Templeman in the 1985 House of Lords case *Street .v. Mountford*. This is what the noble Lord said: “the manufacture of a five pronged instrument for manual digging results in a fork, even if the manufacturer, unfamiliar with the English language, insists that what he intended to make, and has made, is a spade.”

You may not find that all that funny, but it constitutes light relief for law students. Such moments do exist,

principally provided by Lord Denning who in one case, about some turgid point of administrative law, concluded his review of the facts by quoting Touchstone, the court jester in *As You Like It*. On the whole, though, legal judgments are pretty heavy going. I’ve just within the last year or so read a volume of philosophy of religion by Lord Hailsham. I should have taken the hint and been put off by the title, “The Door Wherein I Went.” It just served to remind me, though, why, having had the style of my prose formed by legal study, I’ve spent the subsequent 25 years trying to write in short sentences.

Anyway, you see, the point is that St.Paul would have got on well with Lord Templeman and manufacture of five pronged instruments for manual digging. And that’s because, like Lord Templman, St.Paul realised that you can’t make something into what it isn’t, simply by sticking a label onto it.

Paul had been brought up to prize above all else the pedigree of his Jewish heritage. These were the values by which the very essence of his personality had been shaped. And yet he, more than anybody else in Christian history, is responsible for breaking down barriers between Jew and non-Jew. His calling was to work as an evangelist among people outside the Jewish faith, among the gentiles. And so he had to reconcile, on the one hand, this reverence for Jewishness with, on the other, this disregard for whether people were Jews or not.

He does this, really, by redefining what it is truly to be a Jew. Paul argues that what really entitles someone to be able to claim a share of Jewish inheritance is exhibiting those characteristics and values for which God has found favour in the Jewish people. In other words, faithfulness is what counts. It's always been recognised – it was being warned against in this evening's first lesson from Jeremiah – that simply observing the formalities of being a Jew could be a

stumbling block and didn't necessarily ensure God's favour.

These sorts of arguments could well be transferred today to considerations of English patriotism. Perhaps exhibiting the qualities and values of hospitableness, tolerance and fair play better qualify you to be an English patriot than having white skin or English as your first language.

And all this matters enormously to us at the Priory because we're into heritage on a big way. Like St. Paul, the very identity of the Christian community which meets at the Priory is shaped by its heritage. It's not just incidental that the four walls in which we meet happen to be a memorial of 900 years of Christian spiritual tradition. These walls are a living, dynamic memorial which influence and determine what the Priory is. If this building burnt down to the ground tonight and we built a new church, in one sense it wouldn't matter. The building we put up would be

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good. We would be a good church. We would gather, we would have good worship, we'd be formed into the likeness of Christ, we would enjoy fellowship with one another and we would be commissioned serve Christ in our daily lives. But we wouldn't be the Priory as we know it today.

But what makes us Priory, though, and worthy to bear the inheritance of being Priory, is not just gathering in these walls. It is being faithful to the distinctives of the spirituality that has sustained this building for 900 years: worship, learning, hospitality. If our worship is no more sincere than the burnt offerings and sacrifices against which Jeremiah rails, it will be a stumbling block. If we don't heed the lessons of the cumulative learning of Christian scholarship, we will be like those Jeremiah criticises for not heeding the sound of the trumpet. If we don't actually exercise hospitality, we will be like those Jeremiah criticises for not walking in the ancient paths where the good way is.

And so, as we offer ourselves in response to God's call to serve him in and out from this particular context, let us pray that we will be blessed with all the characteristics that find favour with God; that we will be equipped faithfully to till the ground in which he has set us, whether or not we can be described as a five pronged instrument for manual digging.

Amen.