

Sermon for Bad Salzuflen 29.07.18

Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10; Philippians 3: 7 – 11;

Matthew 25: 14 - 30

Let me first of all say what a great honour it is to be invited to preach in this church this morning. I'm very grateful for the opportunity; and I'm very grateful to Thomas Morgenstern for translating.

One draw-back of this double act between me and Thomas is that jokes do tend to get lost in translation. But the up-side of that is that you are mercifully relieved of any effort on my part to be funny.

Not that I feel much like telling jokes, to be brutally honest. I can't speak with any sort of authority about German society, but Britain is in a very fragile condition. The Brexit referendum in 2016 exposed sharp divisions in our society. And the damage would have been done whatever the result had been.

Britain is a deeply divided nation. And it seems to me there is a realistic risk of our democracy being undermined by the present instability.

I know that this sounds very dramatic, but I do genuinely believe that the situation in Britain at the moment is very serious. I have no idea whether the same is true of Germany. But I suspect that similar forces are at work. I suspect there is a danger of polarisation and fragmentation. And all this in the context of a Trump-led breakdown in the international rules-based order that has secured world peace for over 70 years.

When national disaster struck in Jeremiah's time, the agenda of the Bible was clear: God's in control; it's all part of God's plan; even the nasty and evil things are being used by God; and in the end we will all see God's purposes working out. Disaster will still happen – disaster means disaster – but God will use it all for his own good purposes.

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It's difficult to apply that thinking to our present circumstances. The reading from Jeremiah chapter 1 seems like empty religious words. It seems more like wishful thinking than a realistic theological strategy.

Except that the whole strategy depends on somebody like Jeremiah. And Jeremiah is *not* charismatic, eloquent, able, well qualified and experienced. Jeremiah said "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

Jeremiah felt inadequate, inexperienced and unqualified. He felt he was too insignificant to be of any use to God's strategy. In other words, he was just like you and me. God's strategy *does* depend upon people like Jeremiah: it depends on you and me.

We will be able to endure whatever the next 10 or 20 or 30 years hold for us if people in places like Bad Salzuflen and Bridlington are committed to experiencing each other's cultures, listening to each

other's stories, increasing our understanding of each other and growing in friendship.

More specifically, we will be able to play our part in God's strategy if we apply the teaching of St Paul to the Philippians that we heard read earlier in the service: if we believe that following Jesus is more important than anything else; if we put our commitment to Christ ahead of our allegiance to populist politicians; and if we make the values of his Kingdom the only thing worth living for.

We are going to have to be prepared to risk losing everything – friendships, respectability, perhaps even possessions and social position – to invest those values for the growth of the Kingdom. That is the application of the reading we heard read from St Matthew's Gospel.

But, just as the Lord put out his hand and touched the mouth of Jeremiah, God will sustain us. We will see

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the gospel of Jesus being lived more distinctively. We will see the faith being applied with greater integrity. And we will see the Kingdom grow.

Amen.