

Sixth Sunday after Trinity 2018 (Evensong)

Jeremiah 20: 1 – 11a; Romans 14: 1 – 17

“Judgmental” is a tricky word. I think at face value there’s a sort of presumption that it’s a pejorative word. If somebody says to us that so and so is a bit judgmental, we automatically take it that it’s meant as a criticism of them. On the other hand, we offer respect to people who are of sound and discerning judgment. When people get into doing personality profiling using the Myers-Briggs tests and they’re told they have a personality type that has a preference for being judging, they’re often put out. They think it means they’re judgmental in a prejudicial sense, when in actual fact it simply means they prefer things to be neat, orderly and established. So actually it’s a two sided word.

In this evening’s readings we have one which is an example of courageous, righteous judgment and one which is cautioning us against judging others. But

there’s no real conflict between the two. One is about relations between Christians within the church; and the other is about prophetic responsibility of the faith community to speak in judgment over and against secular power.

In Romans chapter 14 Paul is encouraging Christians to show the sort of pragmatic tolerance of different opinions for the sake of unity that Theresa May could only dream of asserting over the cabinet. It’s the sort of passage, actually, that it’s hard for anyone to take exception to. It could almost be glossed over at the level of platitude. Of course we all prize unity. Of course we all recognise that people tend to make prigs of themselves when they stand on their principles. And we all realise that there are more important things to do than parade our theological hobby horses.

But in think we also ought to acknowledge that it’s easy to pay lip service to this sort of passage but actually quite difficult to put into practice. A few years

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ago Adriane and I were in the congregation at York Minster when Justin Welby was consecrated bishop in order to become Bishop of Durham. This could sound as if it's a bit of a name drop, but I should explain that we weren't there because of anything to do with Justin Welby. There were two people being consecrated bishop that day, and the other was our then next door neighbour, the Archdeacon of Halifax, who was being consecrated to become the Bishop of Penrith. So really we were there more because his wife and Adriane used to go to yoga together than because we move in exalted ecclesiastical circles. And Justin Welby has invited a Nigerian bishop to preach. And he preached, not on this passage, but on a passage from Ephesians all about tolerance and diversity. And he preached the most diplomatic and anodyne sermon about us all having different theologies but it didn't matter because we were all one under Christ; and when he'd lulled us all into a false sense of security there was then the most almighty "but" after which he proceeded to denounce Christians in England for being heretically

liberal. It was quite remarkable, and certainly memorable, and I think really an abuse of the hospitality which had been extended to him.

And there but got the grace of God goes us all. And that's the point. I'd like to think – or more importantly I'd like everybody else to think – that I'm an open, liberal, accepting non-judgmental sort of person. But I know that some people hold theological views that I just cannot reconcile with what I apprehend the Christian is all about. And I end up saying that I just don't know how they can call themselves Christian; or, conversely I end up saying that if that's Christianity, just count me out.

So Paul's counsel may be full of wise words, but perhaps we ought to adopt a little self-knowledge and confession before we reckon to be adopting them.

On the other hand we cannot but admire Jeremiah. He speaks truth onto power; gets himself assaulted

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and placed in the stocks for it; but will not give up. He denounces false prophecy; he denounces those who sycophantically tell political leaders what they want to hear rather than speaking out against them; and he knows that he's doing himself no favours, but steadfastly trusts in God. I suspect few of us would be courageous enough to place ourselves in Jeremiah's shoes. But thank God that, even today, some people are. This is an extract from the "Reclaiming Jesus Declaration" with which Archbishop Michael Curry (he of Royal wedding fame, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church of the United States) – this is the declaration with which he and other Christian leaders marched on the White House on March 24th.

"We are living through perilous and polarising times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake."

It continues: "It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else – nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography – our identity in Christ precedes every other identity. We pray that our nation will see Jesus' words in us. 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35)."

The declaration sets out a number of concerns, including of President Donald Trump's "America first" policy. The declaration describes it as "a theological heresy for followers of Christ," and goes on to say: "while we share a patriotic love for our country, we reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation over others as a political goal."

"We reject domination rather than stewardship of the earth's resources, toward genuine global development that brings human flourishing for all of God's children. Serving our own

communities is essential, but the global connections between us are undeniable. Global poverty, environmental damage, violent conflict, weapons of mass destruction, and deadly diseases in some places ultimately affect all places, and we need wise political leadership to deal with each of these.”

The declaration says: “Our churches and our nations are part of an international community whose interests always surpass national boundaries. The most well-known verse in the New Testament starts with ‘For God so loved the world’ (John 3:16). We, in turn, should love and serve the world and all its inhabitants, rather than seek first narrow, nationalistic prerogatives.”¹

That’s what the declaration to which Archbishop Curry is a signatory says. And if that’s being judgmental, I’m up for a bit of that. Amen.

¹ Anglican News Service website, 11.05.18