



Shocking invitation
Reverend Judith Wigglesworth
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday 14 August 2016
Jeremiah 23:23-29
Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2
Luke 12:49-56

What a week it's been.

Last Sunday we were confronted with the news that we know other faith communities have heard – especially in this post-Christchurch earthquake season. Our buildings are earthquake prone and we may have to worship somewhere else.

Surely not us! Surely not! This happens to other churches.

Yes – us. Yes – it has happened to these sacred buildings – where people of faith whom you have loved and love dearly have lived, mourned, cried, celebrated, sang, prayed, and laughed for years and years.

And so we come to worship today, filled with a range of different emotions. Some, possibly still numb, hope that it's all a bad dream. Others come with a sense of wondering and questioning – “what happens next?” Some bring a matter-of-fact sense of “ok, this is unsettling but we'll work through it”. Yet others might respond: “Isn't this a bit over the top? These buildings have stood perfectly well for years and years and years...” Others may have a sense of opportunity: “yes, it's a shock, but I wonder if we can discern some God-given possibilities in the midst of all this?”

There is no one right or wrong way to respond to this sort of situation. Whatever your personal response, it “is”. We are a diverse people – each with our own personal connection with this faith community, our own “history” with it and within it, and our own sense of the extent to which this particular sacred building has shaped and nurtured our faith. Our personal responses are what they are. Share them with one another, share them with God and accept them for what they are. They are “now” and they are all valid. One of the difficulties faced by church leadership in these situations is how to hold together this whole range of feelings and responses – how to hear them, listen to them and honour them. It’s not easy.

In this past week, two words have come to mind when I have pondered the situation we find ourselves in. One is “challenge” and the other is “invitation”. Let’s look at these two words, in the context of this morning’s readings.

When we came to worship today, maybe we hoped for words of scripture that would encourage us, comfort us, and soothe the wounded spirit. However, the Gospel doesn’t always do what we might want it to do! And perhaps “shock” is one word we might use to describe the Lord’s words shared by the prophet Jeremiah, and the words of Jesus recorded in Luke’s Gospel.

*“Are not my words like a hammer that shatters rock?”
(Jeremiah 23:29)*

God has heard the words of true prophets and the words of false prophets. And he has seen the people of God listen to both the true prophets and the false prophets. The difference between them is like chaff and grain – they are completely and substantially different. God’s words communicated by the true prophets often shock. Like fire. Like a hammer. They may challenge people out of a sense of complacency, of becoming too comfortable, too safe.

Jesus’ shocking words echo this challenge:

*“I have come to set fire to the earth...Do you suppose I came to establish peace? No indeed, I have come to bring dissension.”
(Luke 12:49, 51)*

What has happened to our God of comfort? Where is the God of peace that passes all understanding?

We find this peace if we realise that the dissension Jesus speaks of is not *among* his followers – but *between* those who chose to follow him and those who didn't. In the early church, those who chose to follow this new prophet and teacher, revealed to be the Son of God, did not sign up for an easy ride. Their decision to follow Jesus often amounted to self-exile – they put themselves out on a limb, were often disowned by their own family, and rejected by their friends and neighbours. This thing called Christianity was a risky business. Yet there was a common purpose and calling that drew Jesus' followers together.

Both of these readings are full of challenge for us today. They confront us in our own particular time and place. They command us to sit up and take notice – to remember that being a follower of Jesus is not easy. It demands a level of self-giving and humility that the pride and arrogance of our human minds may find difficult to grasp at the best of times. Right now we face a fresh challenge to be true disciples in the face of uncertainty ahead. Our individual “I” desires will threaten to overcome the sense of “we”, as Ellie shared with us last week, and it's possible that relationships will be stretched in new ways. But God is our constant. God has not changed. Although a comfortable rug may have just been pulled out from under our feet, with God's help we will be able to pick ourselves up, brush ourselves off and find our feet again.

So where and how do we find a sense of invitation?

In the diversity of our own personal responses to our current situation, we need to remember that we have a legacy of faith that precedes us. The people of God through the ages have faced challenge, after challenge, after challenge. The letter to the Hebrews

records some of those figures – people who faced challenges bigger than many of us can ever imagine. To be true to their faith, people suffered in awful ways: the author of the letter to the Hebrews graphically reminds us that our descendants in faith were flogged, stoned, oppressed, deprived, imprisoned - and even sawn in two.

In the midst of the change and uncertainty that we face, the fundamental questions we must ask ourselves are not:

“Why?”

“Where is God in this?”

“How can God possibly be in this?”

But rather:

“How can we use this situation to knit ourselves together even more deeply in God?”

“How can we use this situation to proclaim even more loudly the Gospel to those around us?”

“How can we use this situation to draw even closer alongside others who have not yet heard the Good News?”

All these questions are invitations. They are questions which, if we choose to acknowledge and address, have the capacity to bring fresh transformation to the people of God in this place and in this community.

God’s people have never stood still. All the things that we face, God’s people have faced before. All the things that God has done for God’s people in the past to lead, accompany, and equip them, God will do again, with us and for us. And so in the company of God and those who have gone before us, we are not alone. As the letter to the Hebrews reminds us:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, we too must throw off every weight and the sin that all too readily restricts us, and run with perseverance the race which lies ahead of us, our eyes fixed on Jesus. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

The crux of our invitation today is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. This is just what Bishop Victoria Matthews spoke about in the aftermath of the Canterbury earthquakes. 20 pages of the Eastertide 2011 issue of the magazine *Taonga* were devoted to stories about people helping people in the aftermath of the earthquakes, and included an interview with Bishop Victoria.

Just as I speak of challenge and invitation today, in a similar way Bishop Victoria spoke of challenge and opportunity. First, she acknowledged the great hurt and suffering in all that happened in the Canterbury quakes. She praised the rapid and effective response of church communities to people in need – interestingly commenting that the church is better at emergency response than at long-term challenges. When asked what other dioceses could learn from their experience, she said “get ready”. But what came through most strongly was her sense of anticipation and excitement about the extraordinary opportunity that the quakes presented to the church: the chance to build community without buildings; to discern and reveal God’s presence outside the walls of a heritage cathedral; and to build new bridges between church and community/between God and people. When asked to sum up her learnings in the face of the earthquakes, she said:

“No strategic plan would be able to open doors like this has. Seize the moment!....Don’t ever miss an opportunity to listen to the Spirit and to follow the lead of Christ in what otherwise looks like bad news”.
(*Taonga*, No. 36, Eastertide 2011).

The news we received last week may look like bad news. But God never presents us with limits. God always presents us with invitations and opportunities.

At morning prayer on Thursday morning, as Ellie and I sat huddled around the heater here in the chancel, one of the readings from the Acts of the Apostles, recording the words of Stephen during his trial in Jerusalem, seemed particularly prophetic:

“The Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hands make all these things?”
(Acts 7:49-50, referring to Isaiah 66:1-2)

An invitation to us today is to remember that our God does not dwell in any houses made by human hands. God dwells in us and between us and among us. In the days and weeks and months ahead, we must drink more deeply than ever from the deep well of God’s grace given to us through Jesus Christ. For we are the temple of God’s Holy Spirit.

Whatever the next season in this faith community looks like, we will always gather. We will always draw others in. We will always break bread together. We will always drink from a common cup. And we will always be Christ to one another.

That is God’s challenge and God’s invitation.

Amen.