

Sunday 24th June 2018
11.15am: Jeremiah 19vv1, 3-7, Romans 12vv1-18, 21

Civic Service for new Mayor Mrs Yvonne Spence

'Making Lives Better'

We all need to dream dreams sometimes; because sometimes they are the only things which protect us and insulate us from the awfulness and viciousness which can sometimes be reality. And yet what distinguishes the dreaming of the Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah from ours is that their dreaming- their visions in the night- have nothing to do with escapism or a flight of fancy. Instead they form part of an unshakeable conviction that one day, if only our faith in the power and graciousness of God was also unshakeable, there will be a state where peace, harmony and justice will, finally, win through and gain the upper hand.

And as if to reinforce the grittiness and the 'down to earth-ness' of these dreams, invariably they will be realised not by running away from opposites which threaten to spoil our vision and hope for some kind of Utopia, but by bringing them together and reconciling them. The psalmist is amazed and horrified that the people who had enslaved them would want to hear one of the songs of a land that was now no longer free but under subjugation: 'For there our captors asked us for songs' he laments, 'And our tormentors asked for mirth, saying "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"'; but 'How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?'

And yet Jeremiah's vision in our first reading today is that the opposite is true, and that opposites will and do attract: 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile' he writes, 'And pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare'. It is a shocking, counter-cultural message which would have flown in the face of the feelings of all the subjugated, whose first instinct, as is demonstrated by Psalm 137 would have been non-compliance and resistance.

And that is an attitude far easier to understand, not least because it rings true in every age, including our own. We all battle a certain cynicism, don't we, with the concept that such opposites could *ever* come together to promise something so great. If mountains are levelled it's more likely to be because of our ability to destroy them; if valleys are filled it's more likely to be with the bodies of the countless war dead.

And yet you see, opposites coming together and the extremely unlikely becoming the very likely is precisely the vision and the hope of faith, because all this has a divine imperative. From the moment God decides to work with his creation the impossible becomes possible, and opposites will attract for the common cause of good. From a burning bush that is not consumed but which transforms an angry shepherd into a charismatic leader and saviour of his people, to the deep perception of a priest and a prophet that the youngest and the most insignificant of Jesse's sons- a young man with ruddy cheeks and bright eyes, minding his father's sheep- is nonetheless the chosen one who becomes the greatest king that Israel has ever seen. And then the climax, the pinnacle of this divine-human cooperation; a virgin becomes pregnant. Lowly shepherds and powerful kings at opposite ends of the social spectrum find themselves on their knees in the same stable in front of the Christ child. The hands that flung stars into space are now wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger. And then people begin to find that in their lives a series of opposites begin to attract, usually focussed around an inclusiveness and an acceptance of all humanity whatever their religious or cultural background, which so scandalised the accepted order of the day. People like lepers, social outcasts, Samaritans and Gentiles who, through Jesus' ministry, and the stories he told, brought people to the realisation that what seemed an irreconcilable

difference in fact effects a reconciliation- a wholeness- a restoration. People are brought face to face often with the one thing that seemed obviously to be a foil to faith, only to find that it was the one thing that became the catalyst which threw them into God's arms.

All of you here today are being asked to dream dreams. That's why each of you has a leaf inside your order of service, and I'm going to ask you to write on your leaf your dream, your vision of what might make lives better here in Chelmsford, and at the end of the service, to put your leaf on the tree which you can see displayed here in the cathedral. It will become a tree of dreams which will then stay in the cathedral for a while and become part of, and help to inform, the prayers, hopes and aspirations of the community here, and all who visit this place to come and be with God for a while. And our mandate for doing this is precisely because we sit in a place which for generations has encouraged people to dream dreams, because the belief here is that *nothing* is impossible with God. And what is a Mayor if she is not somebody who can focus and interpret those dreams for us? Somebody who the community elects, not just to be its principal servant, but to be the embodiment somehow of all that goodness and hope and positivity which we know is important but which for most of the time seems to become elusive and contaminated with all the cares and politics which can divide and enslave us? It is why I believe a good Mayor is truly a gift, because, for a while, for a season, she is called to be something *else*, something *extra*, something *different* who can inspire and unite all of us- somebody who is set free to pursue those dreams by which all of us are brought a little nearer to the Kingdom of God.

But there is another hugely important reason why we are all here today. It is to remind Yvonne that she is not alone in this task- indeed to remind each of us that the pursuit of dreams can never be a solitary process. Sometimes you see its very hard isn't it to convince ourselves or to believe that in fact God loves us, and that every hair on our head is counted, but sometimes its only by giving that love away, by doing that profoundly Kingdom thing of paying attention to people in our community who are marginalised, by practising that divine compunction for companionship to another in their need- as St. Paul describes it, to 'Weep with those who weep', that *then* our own worries and concerns are given a context and meaning.

The point is this. However lonely and inadequate we may sometimes feel, however impossible and beyond reach our dreams for better lives might seem, they need to be seen within that context of our common inheritance of God's love and care. It is our common companionship as fellow travellers on the road, our status as co-workers for the cause of righteousness and peace, which gives us the courage and the strength to be able to do all these things for, as St. Paul reminds the Christians in Rome in our second reading today, who he describes as 'Called to be saints', 'We who are many are one Body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another'.

We sometimes think don't we that saints are saints because the cult of sainthood is something about women and men who are lauded for their fierce independence and isolation, lone warriors against hardship, persecution and poverty for the sake of the Gospel. Our own Patron here at the cathedral, St. Cedd, is usually remembered for his courageous and dangerous journey down England's East Coast to the shore at Bradwell here in Essex, and his ongoing battle with pagan Celts intent on depriving him of his message and his life; but we forget that Cedd was formed by, and eventually sent from, a community at Lindisfarne, and that was a principle and a deep source of strength that was to stay with him. He formed a community around him here in Essex, and it was one that was so strong and supportive and loving, that even though he fell victim to the plague, that community was around his bedside as he died, refusing to abandon him in his last hours. It is an incredibly moving story and it belongs to us, and is part of us and our story right here in Essex.

Above all then, our service here today is a reminder that we are all called to be saints- called to dream dreams that entail working with opposites and not running away from them, and to do so as a community of faith, here to be reminded of that promise of Jesus which overcomes all temptation to shrink at the apparent impossibility of it all: 'In the world you have tribulation' says Jesus, 'But be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world'.

Yes indeed then: it is time to talk; it is time to change; it is time to *make lives better.*

So let's do it! Get writing!