

Jeremiah 29, 1, 4-7

2 Timothy 2:3-15

Luke 17: 11-19

Consider – if you will – these three scenarios relating to the Church in the world today and our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Scenario one.

The Council, or local authority, is contracting out aspects of its elderly care service.

A group of churches which have something of a track record in this area put a bid together and win the contract to deliver the said work.

Is this the Church living out its true calling or is it a distortion?

Scenario two.

A Christian finds themselves in some difficulty at work. Someone has complained that they have 'inappropriately shared their faith', prompting an official investigation.

The Christian feels they have been wronged and they approach the legal team of Christian Concern who agree to defend them in court.

Or, to make it a bit more personal, I get told I can't use my Reverend title on the website of University of Bristol where I am employed.

I am quite incensed by this. I contest the decision and I try and enlist support from my colleagues to fight my corner.

Again, is this our true vocation – how Christians should behave – or is it a distortion?

And the final scenario, we notice that the numbers are flagging for our main Sunday service...

(This is hypothetical, I might add!)

...so we develop a new service called 'Breakfast @ 9' aimed at children and young families. You get bacon and eggs. The Dean kindly offers to run it.

And then because we are not quite sure that Breakfast @ 9 is right for the teenagers, we launch another service on Sunday evening – we'll call it 'Donuts @ 6 – to cater for them. This one will be for Canon Nicola.

And we produce a glossy leaflet advertising what's on offer and encouraging people to make the choice which 'feels right for them'.

Again, is this the Church living out its true calling – bringing the gospel to a new generation perhaps – or is it a distortion?

Luke Bretherton, in his book *Christianity and Politics*, argues that all three of my scenarios, which are real enough, are a distortion.

More about pride and self-love than love of God or love of neighbour.

The first example – that of the Church winning the elderly care contract from the Council – is he says co-option.

That is, the Church is being coopted by the state.

Not our true calling.

There is nothing wrong with us being in the business of caring for the elderly – on the contrary – but delivering a sub-contracted out Council service, that's not for us.

What happens when the whim of the government changes, as it will? Where will we be then?

And then the second scenario.

Me jumping up and down when I couldn't use my Reverend title in the University or the Christian at work rushing to Christian Concern to defend their rights.

This, Luke Bretherton, calls competition.

The Church viewing itself as being like any other interest group in society with rights to defend.

Jockeying for position. Fighting its corner.

No, says Bretherton. This is a distortion of our true calling.

And finally, my third scenario, church services to suit all tastes and styles, shopping around until we find the right one for us, something for everyone...

...probably not bad in and of itself.

But there is a danger of what Bretherton calls commodification.

That is, the Church, succumbing to the market, as just another lifestyle choice, something we consume.

Again, no, says Bretherton. Not our true calling. A distortion.

So the three Cs

Co-option

Competition

& Commodification

Traps we can all too easily fall into either as the institution of the Church or as the people of God.

They're not necessarily all bad – there is some method in them – but it is not our true calling.

Instead, we are destined – through God's grace – for something altogether different. A different kind of calling.

Enter Jeremiah 29. Our Old Testament reading. And a question.

Who is Jeremiah writing to?

Well, he is writing to the Jews in exile, isn't he, who have been driven out of Jerusalem and are in Babylon.

It doesn't sound good, Babylon, does it? It never does.

And the Jews are distinctly unhappy.

In exile, their one-time status in society has been lost.

They are in a place which worships other gods.

And their religion is seen as a bit of an affliction or at the very least slightly odd.

Ring any bells?

Our status or standing in society not what it was...

In a place where people worship other gods...

Consumerism is a well-known one.

And at a time when being a Christian is seen as a somewhat “pitiable defect” or just plain odd.

It’s remarkable – and I am by no means the first to comment on this – the parallels which can be drawn between the context in which Jeremiah is writing and our own ‘post-Christendom’ context – the context facing us, the Church, today.

But what advice does Jeremiah give the Jews?

It is not – you won’t be surprised to hear – co-option, competition or commodification.

But what is it?

The key verse is verse 7 and to my ears it’s electric.

‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile...’

‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you...’

...Pray to the Lord on its behalf...

...For in its welfare you will find your welfare’

You are in exile. You are feeling distinctly vulnerable.

You don’t like the direction society is going.

You are deeply unconvinced by the powers that be.

The temptation is surely to say: ‘I won’t have anything to do with it’.

I will withdraw from the ways of the world.

I will keep myself clean. I will keep myself pure.

Ever felt like that? Gosh, I know I have!

Or, at the other extreme, you say: 'I will take the so and so's on'.

We will sweep it all away. We'll begin again – a fresh start.

May be in some ways that was the flaw of Occupy or movements like it, noble though they are in many respects.

You can't wipe the slate clean.

Or, alternatively, as we look at the problems of the world, we simply lose hope, despair.

Conclude that nothing will ever change.

No, no, no!

This is not an option, Jeremiah says.

Seek the welfare of the city.

You must hang out with the powerful.

You have to run the risk of being compromised.

This is not about rolling over, or seeking power, or being competitive or being co-opted.

But it is about seeking the welfare of the city. This is our calling.

Believing in the city's redemption, the redemption of the world.

Coaxing it along – in our own small ways.

Looking for the first fruits.

Seeing the Kingdom. The New Jerusalem, bursting forth.

We do get our hands dirty. We will be compromised.

But we do so knowing that what we glimpse dimly here on earth – and we do glimpse it – is but a foretaste of what is to come.

What am I describing – at root – that is bound up in Jeremiah's call for us – all of us, exiled from our true home...Jeremiah's call to us to seek the welfare of the city where God has sent us?

What am I describing?

Surely what I am describing is none other than the way of the cross.

Jesus Christ, who we follow, hangs out in some pretty unsavoury places with people who are hated, marginalised and feared.

Today, in our reading from Luke, he's on the border between Samaria and Galilee.

Borders, if you have ever spent any time on them, are often dark and lawless places.

On the borders of Vietnam and China and Vietnam and Cambodia, where I have spent quite a bit of time, the trafficking of young girls for sex is shockingly in your face, it is not hidden...

Jesus inhabits these kinds of places.

Today, he is with lepers and Samaritans.

Tomorrow he is with those in power, tax collectors and the occupying army.

We too, in our own lives and in our own distinctive ways – it will be different for all of us – need to walk in his footsteps and inhabit the borderlands – literally and metaphorically – be it with the powerful or the powerless.

To seek the welfare of the city. To seek their welfare.

And perversely, so perversely, in doing so, and only in doing so, will we find our true selves, will we come home.

New life.

A peace and love that we can scarcely imagine.

And then, one of the ten, just one, that Jesus had met on the way to Jerusalem, turned back and fell at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

And all the saints and angels in heaven rejoiced!