

Jeremiah 33:14-16 - Bristol Cathedral

Not quite ten years ago, George W. Bush was two years into his tenure as President of the United States. He was interviewed by the journalist Bob Woodward, the man who broke the Watergate story. Woodward asked the President about his place in history. "History," Bush replied. "We don't know. We'll all be dead." Seven years later he published a memoir and revised his story slightly, he said this,

I hope I'm judged a success, but I'm going to be dead when they finally figure it out

Politicians worry about history; they worry about what it will say about them. When Tony Blair left office he said,

Let the day-to-day judgments come and go: be prepared to be judged by history

Let's be clear, the question this morning is not whether history will be kinder to Mr Blair or Mr Bush. That is an interesting question, we can discuss it over lunch; but it is not the question for Advent Sunday. The question for Advent Sunday is 'What do we have to say about our past and future?'

You see, something very odd has happened to us. Our politicians now talk about history as if it has things to say about the future. The point about history is that it *will* pass judgement; it will tell us if Mr Blair was a good thing. Mr Bush meanwhile, probably thinks history is a waste of time because we will all be dead before it can tell us anything. Now, I was a historian and I beg to differ. I don't think history is about the future and I don't think it is a waste of time. But, we will come back to that.

I want you to notice something else. Politicians are talking about *history* as our judge. That is another novelty. It was not always like that. The assumption used to be that we would be judged by God. Churches used to have a great judgement scene either painted up there above the chancel arch, or down there in the west window. The idea that God is a God of history and that God is a God of judgement used to be commonplace. Not anymore.

All this is by way of introduction. We need to notice that judgement has become a slippery thing. We are no longer sure what can be said, we are no longer sure who will say it. We will return to all this, I promise, but only after we have thought about Jeremiah.

It was a short first reading:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

To make sense of this I need to give you a quick history lesson. Jeremiah is interested in history and, whatever Mr Bush may think, Jeremiah knows history does not tell us what we will be, it tells us where we came from and who we are. Jeremiah lived through one of the great cataclysms of Jewish history. At the beginning of the Sixth Century a new empire rose in the east: in Babylon, an empire of hanging gardens and great palaces, an empire of armies, force and slavery. They swept through Israel; they deposed a king and carried the nobility away in chains. That was bad enough; later they returned and laid siege to the cities, burning, looting, and killing. Our reading dates from the beginnings of that siege: words of reassurance in a terrible crisis

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

Jeremiah is reminding the citizens of Jerusalem, on the brink of catastrophe that they have a history. And in the strange way of prophets, he does not simply describe the history he lives it. You see, Jeremiah came from Anathoth; the Book Jeremiah tells us as much: chapter one, verse one,

The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin,

Now, in the bible, where you come from and who your parents were signifies, think of all those lists of who begat whom. And in the great story of the kings of Judah, Anathoth has a place. There is a reason why Hilkiah and the family of priests came from Anathoth. There's a history and it matters.

The history Jeremiah recalls is the history of God, the history of the Old Testament. In that story the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness being reminded again and again that they used to be powerless,

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt

They had left Egypt, where power was abused, and they were led to a land of plenty. That is *the* story in the bible. It is a story about the way power corrupted the Egyptians and trust in God. Later though, famously, history takes another turn, in the days of Solomon Israel forgets its own story, itself gets hooked on power and in a terrible abuse of its own history starts keeping slaves. And as Israel forgets its history Solomon makes sure it will stay that way, he identifies his enemies and isolates them. Some are killed and one is exiled. Abiathar the priest is dismissed and he is sent to..., you've guessed it, Anathoth. There's a reason there are priest in Anathoth and it has to do with power.

When Jeremiah blows in from Anathoth to stand in the streets of Jerusalem, in the days of death, he appears with that startling back story. It is not just what he says that commands attention, it is who he is. In him, the history of Israel looms up, a stark reminder of what power does and what vocation looks like. And then Jeremiah, the historian, says that the future will be different; he says that Jerusalem will change. It will not be known as a city of death, oppression and terror, it will be known as something different. Jerusalem, Jeremiah says, will be called

"The LORD is our righteousness."

In short, Jeremiah says, God will have the last word and the story will be told as it was always meant to be told.

All this is our introduction to Advent. Think about Jeremiah; think about a man in a city where the heavens are falling in. Think about Jeremiah stubbornly telling the story and stubbornly declaring that God is still God. We still have past, we still have a future..

Think about us. Think about our loss of confidence, our loss of control. We can't regulate the markets and, it seems, we can't regulate the press, we talk of an *Arab spring* and wonder if it is turning into winter instead. We fight wars that don't seem like wars and end with neither victory, nor peace. We are bombarded with information and we join in with a will on *twitter* and *Facebook*. Stories spiral out of control until the innocent are found guilty without trial. There are so many stories being told we do not what is true and no-one has the authority to judge. No wonder politicians tell us that history is for the future. We have lost our belief that there is a story you can tell; we have lost any sense of direction.

It is this crisis which Advent addresses - if we will let it. We are here this morning because as Christians we are prepared to think that there might be a story we can tell, might be a claim we can make about our identity, might be a direction in which we should travel. Advent makes just two claims: that Christ comes to the world and that God judges. The first is the claim that we have a history, a story to tell. The second is the claim that it matters how the story turns out.

Advent is a season that warns us about bowing down to the false gods, capitalism, hopelessness, power, process. Advent sets before us, history and judgement. Advent asks us what we hope for and invites us, with Jeremiah to believe that our lives and our cities really could like the righteousness of God.

It is not a bit of ritual we keep today, nor a number of shopping days to Christmas we must tick off. This Sunday begs the question we began with, *'What do we have to say about our past and future?'*

History, said Mr Bush, *We don't know. We'll all be dead.* I beg to differ; it's precisely the pretence that there is no history no judgement that will kill us. We must not forget who we are, nor buy the idea that there are no judgements we can make. We must not shrug our shoulders and accept it is all too complicated. It is Advent and Christ comes to meet us as our life and our judge. It is Advent and we should pay attention to our past and our future.