

## Sermon Evensong Ordinary Sunday 14/Trinity VI Year B 2024

When reading the history books of the Old Testament, it is very easy to come away with a dim view of humankind. While there are some glorious high moments, much of the history books – Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah – can leave us with a less-than-enthusiastic regard for this part of our religious history. The ancient authors do not shy away from highlighting the shenanigans and failings of our ancestors in the faith. Adultery, murder, idolatry and division appear on almost every page. To refresh your memory, after King Solomon, the kingdom of Israel divided into two, each with its own kings and own territory. The Kingdom of Israel and 10 of the tribes in the north. And in the south, the tribes of Judah and Ephraim centered around Jerusalem forming the Kingdom of Judah.

In the books of Kings and Chronicles, when it comes to recount the story of both the kings of Judah and of Israel, it is mostly a sorry litany. A constant refrain is, *'so and so did evil in the sight of the Lord.'* And this evil is mostly expressed in terms of infidelity to the covenant God had established with his people, the people he had sought a special relationship with, to whom he had revealed himself, and imparted the Law. Well, it was not very long before this had been forgotten, was either neglected or undermined. The story of the leadership of both Israel and Judah is mostly a story of failure. Even though God had revealed himself, imparted the Law, and sent prophets to keep them on track, the pattern appears to have been the abandonment of the covenant relationship in favour of idolatry. It would not be until after the exile in Babylon that this fatal pattern would more or less be dealt the fatal blow.

But amid the gloom, every now and then there appears a gleam of light. In the historical record of the Old Testament every now and then we hear of someone who breaks the mold, who adds a different note to the litany. So and so *did what right in the eyes of the Lord*. And one such we have heard today in the first lesson from the second Book of Kings. We heard tonight part of the story of the young king Josiah who we, are told, was a righteous king, a king who *"walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left"*. The remarkable story tells of how under Josiah a religious reform was enacted. Almost all the kings in the ancient record tell us how they did evil in the sight of the Lord. Yet here was one who did what was right. Under Josiah, the Temple was restored after having fallen into neglect. And while digging around, the high priest rediscovered the Law.

We might overlook this detail, but the Law of Moses had essentially been forgotten. This central aspect of Jewish identity had been lost. For centuries (generations!) the Law had not been observed, and the covenant had been neglected. But having discovered this 'Book of the Law' (almost certainly a copy of the Book of Deuteronomy) Josiah set about to clean up the act. The law is read out, the idols and their priests cast out, and the people recommit to the covenant. It is a powerful story. *After centuries of neglect and forgetfulness things are put right!* Hope wins out!

And Luke's singular masterpiece – the story of the Prodigal Son – likewise a story of hope. The sorry lad in a state of desperation and despondency has his story turned around. His selfishness, his greed, his insult to family, are put aside in the light of hope. The boy's own hope, yes, but the father's as well. The Father's hope that his son would return. And a hope that was not disappointed. We only see half the picture if we imagine Christian hope is simply about *our* hope for something better. Our hope ultimately rests on *God's* hope for us, that we will hear *his* voice, respond to *his* invitation, and accept the faith and love *he* offers.

When we are tempted to give ourselves over to pessimism and despair - for ourselves, our world, and even our church – we need to remember these stories, and others like them. It is very easy for us to look at the world about us and see it going to hell in a handbasket. We look about us, and perhaps only see infidelity upon infidelity, an abandonment of what God has revealed to us, a turning away from what God has gifted his church. And it might be tempting to think that this is the inevitable trajectory. That ahead of us is only decline. Only tepidity. Only collapse in the moral order. Only apostasy and heresy. Only a revisionist agenda.

But both the readings today highlight that *none of this* is inevitable. Things can turn around! New things can emerge. Restoration is possible! This is not empty wishful thinking! Our hope that things can turn around is given extra potency - extra charge - in the light of the resurrection. The great Christian apologist and author C.K. Chesterton famously argued, "*Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.*" We need to remember that we are people of hope, and that God can turn any situation around. No matter how dire things are, we are people of hope. When we align our hope for ourselves with God's hope for us things *can* turn around. Then, things truly *can* get better. Amen.