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**21st November: Proper 29 : Jeremiah 23.1-6, Colossians 1.11-20, Luke 23. 33-4**

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*The Expository Times* 2010 122: 31

DOI: 10.1177/00145246101220010603

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ext.sagepub.com/content/122/1/31.citation>

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not bored by them. They are deeply disturbing. I have turned off the TV or changed the channel when they come on because I don't want to deal with their images. I want to shut out the pain and avoid the suffering that they reveal. And I have done that because they can suck the hope and the joy out of me – because they leave me feeling privileged and guilty and incredibly spoiled all because I had the good luck to be born in a land that has food, water, and for the most part, peace and good order.

We know that all that pain and misery are out there but it won't go away because we go away from it. The gospel is not found in watching suffering, nor is it found in complaining about how it is with us, rather it is found in doing what we can to alleviate it.

Perhaps you have heard the story about the rabbi and the soap maker who went for a walk together one day. As they walked along the soap maker said to the Rabbi, "What good is religion? Look at all the trouble and misery of the world after thousands of years of teaching about goodness, truth and peace – even after all your prayers and sermons. If religion is good and true, why should we have all this injustice – all this unrest?"

And it is an excellent question – the question that so many of us have asked when we encounter suffering. What good is God - what good is religion, if all this misery and suffering and war continues to exist?

The rabbi said nothing. They continued walking until he noticed a child playing in the gutter.

Then the rabbi said: "Look at that child. You say that soap makes people clean, but look at the dirt on that youngster's face. What good is soap? With all the soap in the world, the child is still filthy. I wonder how effective soap is after all." The soap maker protested, "But, Rabbi, soap can't do any good unless it is used." "Exactly", replied the Rabbi. "And so it is with religion. It is ineffective unless it is applied."

I am not going to tell you all about the wars and death that exists in so many parts of our world today. You

already know that. But what I am going to say is that each of us can do something to help. Actions do make a difference. And that in the long term is what is important - making a difference. In the face of adversity look for the opportunity to tell others who are facing hard moments about the love and goodness and salvation of Jesus. We are not called to preach to them but to tell them our story! And our story should be one of Hope!

We might not be able to stop wars, or famines or plagues but we should be aware that Love does not sit by the wayside, looking at those who suffer or complaining about how bad things are, and making judgements about who or what is to blame. Love leads to involvement - to attempt to heal and help, and wipe away the tears, - to attempt to be like Jesus.

Is it right to go to war or not? I'm convinced that the ultimate desire of all Christians is to experience the state described in Isaiah:

'The Lord says, 'I am making a new earth and new heavens. The events of the past will be completely forgotten...the new Jerusalem I make will be full of joy and her people will be happy.' (Is 65:17-18)

That will be Utopia and even though that might be the ultimate plan of God how can we help to bring it about? The short answer is I don't know because I think there are many diverse ways of accomplishing this. But I do know this. I do know that I am here today, fed, watered and safe because of the sacrifices of past family members and their generation. Our faith should give us real hope that things – however dreadful – can be different. But only if we are awake and attentive and fearless in our loyalty to goodness and truth and freedom for all.

Today let us continue to honour our dead and those who gave so much that when we leave this building we can go into the world proclaiming the Good News of God and bring hope to troubled places and people.

## ***21st November: Proper 29***

*Jeremiah 23.1-6, Colossians 1.11-20, Luke 23. 33-4*

### **Jenny Gaffin**

Assistant Curate, St Peter's Parkstone

I need to come clean with you from the outset. I dread preaching on the theme of reconciliation and

forgiveness. I dread it in part because it is so difficult to forgive at times, and therefore hard to practise

what I know I should be preaching. I dread it because it's so costly to bring about reconciliation when people in our communities are at odds with each other. And I dread it for a third reason, and that is the sheer impossibility of knowing who is listening to me now, who feels I have wronged them in some way. Parishes are complicated things – a wonderfully strange mixture of hopes and commitments and compromises and hidden conflicts. Over the last year or so that I've been at St Peter's, I've been hugely grateful to those gracious enough to affirm my work. But I've also been acutely conscious that there have been times when I've unknowingly waded into political minefields that are intimately familiar to those of you who have worshipped here for many years, but that I was wholly unaware of. While it's wonderful to know that I've been able to offer support and encouragement to this community, I'm aware that there have equally been times when I have inadvertently upset people. And so I preach this sermon knowing that I not only need to learn how to forgive, but that I am also in deepest need of forgiveness myself.

"Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do", prays Jesus as he goes to his death. These are difficult, challenging words. They are words I wrestled with deeply in the years prior to my ordination, when I worked with women in a refuge who had been savagely mistreated by their partners. As the women trusted me with their stories, many of them spoke of their guilt at being unable to forgive the men who had harmed them. Steeped in Scripture, these women had been taught that they should forgive and seek reconciliation with the dangerous men they were fleeing. It made me angry to think that well-meaning Christians were compounding their pain with the additional burden of guilt, but it took me a long time to work out what else these texts could mean. If Jesus was willing to forgive his persecutors, surely so should we, and surely so should those women, end of story.

It was only as I stayed with those words, and prayed through my unease with them, that I realised that this was really not the end of the story. For a start, Jesus does not turn to his persecutors and say, "I forgive you" – surely the most direct way of communicating his intent to them. Instead, what he offers is a prayer: "Father, forgive them". Racked by pain,

he places them into God's hands, asking that God release them from the burden of the wrongs they are committing. And he goes on to explain: "Father forgive them, *for they do not know what they do*." Jesus is able to invite God's forgiveness upon them precisely because they cannot appreciate the full extent of the harm they are causing. This at first seems a little dubious – surely the people knew full well the harm they were causing as they nailed a man to the cross, just as the men who were so brutal to the women at the refuge knew full well they were causing pain. And yet those who crucified Jesus could never have guessed that they were torturing and killing the Son of God, the Messiah; nor could they have guessed the extent of the danger in which they placed their own soul. And few people who perpetrate abuse have any conception of the true, entrenched, long-term cost of their actions. So Jesus asks God to forgive, and he does so on the grounds that God knows the full extent of the perpetrators' ignorance and human fallibility.

Back in the parish, reflecting on human fallibility, I realise just how much hurt is caused in our community through the sheer impossibility of understanding or meeting everybody's needs all the time. Anyone who exercises leadership of any sort knows that there is no such thing as a perfect decision. All of us inevitably prioritise one set of needs or values or hopes or expectations over another in order to get jobs done and forward the life of the community as best we can. This places us peculiarly in need of God's help, as we ask God to forgive those who seem to us to be obstructing the work we are trying in good faith to undertake, and as we ourselves require forgiveness for decisions taken that hurt others.

Returning to our Gospel reading, it's precisely this handing back of responsibility to God that Jesus reveals to us as the path towards resurrection. As he places his persecutors in God's hands, and as one of the criminals crucified with him places his trust in Jesus, a space is opened in which the work of resurrection can begin to take place. It's not that everybody suddenly becomes best buddies and everything's ok; it's not like that. Jesus is still crucified and the taunts continue without redress, just as the women I worked with in the refuge continued to live in fear of

their former partners. The injustice and the horror go nowhere, and neither does the very real danger that the perpetrators unwittingly place themselves in. “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture”, warns God in Isaiah. Yet in the midst of the pain there is grace. As Jesus expresses a new level of trust in God, and the criminal dying with him expresses a new level of trust in Jesus, the impossible begins to become possible. Those who are executing Jesus so cruelly are given the hope of redemption. And the men condemned to death alongside Jesus, have the option of embracing forgiveness and finding their astonished way into the kingdom of heaven.

And so, through this extraordinary moment, Paul is able to boast of how in Jesus, God is able “to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross”. This is costly stuff, and we must not abuse it. Reconciliation does not mean being as superficially nice to each other as

possible whilst glossing over our differences with the minimum of fuss, no matter how great the temptation in our busy church communities. Nor does it mean hounding ourselves with guilt when we cannot forgive someone who has hurt us. It means having the honesty to face the brokenness of the moment, acknowledging both the pain we suffer and the pain we inflict, and placing the situation in God’s hands. It is for God to forgive where we cannot; it is for Jesus to absorb the pain and injustice of the situation into his broken body, as with open hearts we break bread and recall his sacrifice. Our task, over and over again, is to place ourselves back into God’s hands, recognising that we cannot resolve every situation or fix every relationship; recognising our own dependence on God’s forgiveness as we muddle along in all our too-human fallibility.

Father forgive us for we do not know what we do.  
Jesus, remember us when you come into your kingdom.

Amen.

## ***28<sup>th</sup> November: First Sunday of Advent***

### **Guard Against Presumption**

*Matthew 24:36-44*

### **John Shepherd**

Dean of Perth, Western Australia

The Gospel set down for Advent Sunday (Matthew 24:36-44) is a good example of how God doesn’t work. If you want to know what God doesn’t do, then take this morning’s Gospel literally. It is not the message Advent Sunday is intended to bring.

Matthew’s account of the coming of the Son of Man (24:36-44) is about rejection. It’s littered with terrible warnings. It paints a picture of a menacing, graceless God coming with devastating power to judge, and without compunction to distinguish between those who are to be saved, and those who are not.

There will be no warning. No-one, not even the angels in heaven, not even the Son, will know the day and the hour of the Lord’s coming.

Just as in the days of Noah and the great flood, the careless, the profligate, the unbelievers will perish. People will be going about their daily business, when suddenly the Lord will come; some will be saved, the rest will be discarded.

So be ready, says the writer of Matthew’s gospel. Be constantly on your guard, because the Lord will come at a time you least expect, and you will be judged. If you are found wanting, you will be cast