

So, regular members of our real world congregation will know that quite often my sermons are only very *loosely* connected to that day's Bible passages – for a couple of reasons. One, in most services we have *three* readings so it's somewhere between hard and impossible to do justice to all of them in ten short minutes and, as we know, certain members of the congregation really don't like it if I speak for anything more than ten minutes [right, Sue?!]

Two, I look after more than one church, so I want my sermons to be reusable – recyclable, even; cos we are an eco-friendly benefice [or group of churches] and I think Teresa who heads up our eco-church is online; hello Teresa and Vaughan. But it's more efficient for me to write a sermon which I can preach in Wye one week and Boughton Aluph or Brook the next. But because we have different readings each Sunday, my talk can't be tied too closely to any them and I tend to preach on a general *theme* instead.

But sometimes a Bible reading is just so... strange like our first passage today from the prophet Jeremiah that I can't just... move on as if nothing had happened and the strangeness simply has to be addressed. So, what was Jeremiah talking about with his rather obscure reference to sour grapes?

Well, that phrase [sour grapes] as *we* now use it (to mean being a bad loser) comes from Aesop's Fables, the one about the fox and the

grapes – which, as I say it sounds funny. You know, I imagine Aesop sitting at the bar in his local in Thrace saying ‘Have you heard the one about... the tortoise and the hare?’ Which, now I come to mention it could have been the name of the pub. Perhaps that’s what inspired him? Is one of the fables called The Dog and Duck?!

Anyway, Jeremiah is thought to have been born about 30 years after Aesop, so 650 and 620 BC respectively – and if that sounds the wrong way round, well, they counted backwards in those days! Well, *they* didn’t. They didn’t *know* they were living before Christ or before the common era if your prefer. But given that, it’s *possible* that Jeremiah knew about Aesop’s story. But actually Jeremiah refers to this as being an already well-known saying in Israel as does another biblical source, the prophet Ezekiel who was a more exact contemporary of Aesop’s. And the proverb that *they* both quote is very different in meaning from Aesop’s fable.

So, Aesop’s fox tried very hard to reach some grapes that were at the top of a vine but eventually gave up saying ‘Well, they were probably sour anyway’. So the same sort of mentality as a bad workman blaming his tools...

The saying that Jeremiah and *Ezekiel* referred to – ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge’ – was essentially making the same point that *God* did in his footnote to the

second commandment: ‘Don’t worship idols... for I am a *jealous* god, punishing *children* for the iniquity of the *parents* to the third and fourth generation. Which doesn’t seem very fair or reasonable, does it? And of course that was Ezekiel and Jeremiah’s *point*...

Jeremiah simply says that people will die for their *own* sins not anyone else’s, but Ezekiel spells it in more detail, imagining a good man [it’s always a man in the Old Testament] who has an evil son. Now, clearly, the son won’t get any kind of pass because of his Dad. He’ll be judged on his own actions. Cos that’s what justice demands. And by the same token, his *children*, if he has any, aren’t automatically tarred with the same brush; they start out with a clean slate – or do they...?

As part of my ministerial *training*, I did a placement in a women’s prison in Bristol and what really struck me was how many of the people I met there had effectively been born into a life of crime. You know, half the time their parents were in jail too; and their brothers and their boyfriends; all of which raised the question (the question that I grappled with in the essay I had to write about my experience there): were they really *responsible* for their current predicament or were they victims of circumstance? And in fact ‘Villains or Victims?’ was the title of my subsequent theological reflection and you can probably guess which side on the argument I came down on...

So, it's a fact that criminality, abuse and other dysfunctional patterns of behaviour run in families – we see that all the time at Heal For Life, the charity for survivors of child abuse I run with others from Wye church; hello Lucy and Francis if you're watching. So, some people suggest that that infamous statement in Exodus 20 about 'visiting the sins of the fathers' on future generations is more a description of how *reality* works rather than of how a loving God behaves...

I don't know. I'd *like* that to be true because I'm uncomfortable with the idea of a punitive god. More than uncomfortable, I completely reject it. Because of both my personal *experience* of God and because I believe that Jesus was sent to show us what God is *really* like and Jesus certainly wouldn't behave like that. But I'm not sure that an honest reading of the text supports that interpretation. You know, it seems pretty clear to me that whoever wrote the book of Exodus *did* believe in, not just a punitive god, but a god who practiced *collective* punishment – that is, punishing the innocent for the crimes of the guilty, something that's now *illegal* under international law; and considered a war-crime. And we saw that, horrifically, a few chapters earlier in the ten plagues of Egypt the last of which involved god supposedly killing every first-born baby in Egypt to teach their ruler, Pharaoh, a lesson.

Well, we talked about Pharoah last week. And called him evil because *he* tried to kill every male Jewish baby; so how we can *possibly* suggest that a loving God would do the same?! Well, because we're human and wanting to do to others *as they have done to us* is a natural, instinctive reaction. And this was the era in which people believed that god was on *their* side and prayed that he would give them victory over their enemies in battle. A primitive understanding of god. Although sadly some people still think like that today – and maybe all of us do to a certain extent. As the American author Annie Lamott famously said, 'You can be sure that you've created God in your own image if it turns out he hates all the same people *you* do...'

So I'm not judging our ancestors for their primitive understanding of god – I mean, I *am* but not too harshly because, for me, the Bible clearly presents an *evolving* picture of god; which finally comes into focus in Jesus. And we see that in today's reading. Not Jesus but this evolution of thought...

So, Jeremiah acknowledges that of course it would be unreasonable for a child to be punished for the sins of their parents and clarifies that everyone is judged purely on their *own* merits – or lack of them.

Although the passage *ends* on a *positive* note with God promising to 'forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more'; and clearly we believe that that applies to *us* too not just the people that Jeremiah was writing to...

But let's return to the idea of the sins of the fathers being visited on their descendants in the more literal, sociological sense. The following quote appeared on my Facebook feed the other day: 'Pain gets passed down through families until someone is ready to feel it'. And when I googled that to try and find the source, I got an amplified version which said: 'Pain travels through family lines until someone is ready to heal it in themselves. By going through the agony of healing, you no longer pass the poison chalice onto the generations that follow. It is incredibly important and sacred work...

Well, Amen to that and for me that work (which is very much what we're doing with the Heal For Life project) is absolutely central to my spirituality and my understanding of what it means to walk with God. You know, Jesus talked in chapter 3 of John's Gospel about conversion as a process of 'coming into the light' which can be not just painful but terrifying because it involves facing truths about yourself that you'd rather not. But he also said in John chapter 8 that the truth will set you free. It might *hurt* but it sets you and future generations free – and possibly even more than that.

I know I talked once in the all-age service in Wye about a strange mystical experience I had in which it seemed that God was saying that the transformative and healing work He was doing in my life wouldn't just benefit my *descendants* (and this was a couple of years before Arun and Tallulah were born) but would somehow reach *back*

in time and have an effect on my ancestors too. Now I'm not sure *how* – or even *if* – that's possible but it *would* fit with what Jesus said in our second reading today about drawing all people to Himself and the idea that's *hinted* at in the first letter of Saint Peter of the saving work of Christ applying retrospectively to the people who lived before him.

Anyway, I think I've already gone over my ten minutes. Sorry, Sue. And that was just a few thoughts on *one* of our two readings. The second of which from John's Gospel seemed hugely relevant to our current situation with this horrendous global pandemic; I'm thinking particularly of the line 'Father, save me from this hour' which is very similar to what Jesus said in the garden of Gethsemane the night before he died: Let this cup pass from me. And I do want to talk about that in more detail – but not now. I'm going to make that my text on Maunday Thursday in just under two weeks' time. But right now, let's think about the cup that what I saw on Facebook challenges us all to drink, the 'poisoned chalice' of the negative and destructive patterns of behaviour that we've inherited from our parents and grandparents and let's ask God for the grace and the courage, to 'drink' it, to face the pain that that involves and so transcend it and create a better future for our children and grandchildren and all humanity. So let us pray...