Sermon

Pentecost XI

25/8/19

Eltham

Planned Giving IV 2019

**Readings**

Jeremiah 1:4-10 Jeremiah’s call

Psalm 71:1-6

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

+FSHS

First week the message in relation to our giving was about our complete dependency on God, that all that we are and have comes from God and returns to God, passing through our hands not to be grasped but stewarded. Second week the clear message to us about our giving is this: what do we need to give in order to look expectantly towards, work towards, and be prepared for the coming realm of God, for meeting Jesus where we find him gone before us in our world? Is this our chief treasure, seeking the realm of God? Last week, Mary’s wholehearted “yes” to God which is a model to us for our “yes” to God with our whole lives, including in how we steward our resources.

This week we hear the story in the first reading of Jeremiah’s call to be God’s voice to the people of Israel at a very difficult time. God declares: “I knew you before you were even formed in the womb, and you were born for this, Jeremiah.” He tries to get out of the call, “But I’m only a boy and no one will believe me!” God responds by nothing less than touching his mouth, and giving the prophet the authority to speak with God’s voice, proclaiming justice and judgment as well as restoration and hope for God’s people.

We know Jeremiah had a rough time of it, and he was tempted to give up – tried to give up – several times. Because he was speaking unpopular truths, the officials of his day did horrible things to him – putting him in the stocks, chucking him down a well to sink in the mud and die (or starve, it was the middle of a siege). The people in the streets laughed and tittered as he passed in ridicule. Being obedient to God’s call cost Jeremiah dearly. And yet, when he tried to throw in the towel, he couldn’t keep silent. The call of God to speak was like “fire in his bones”; in spite of the cost and the bitterness of the call, he felt compelled to continue to carry God’s messages to the rulers of his day. And he both laments the hardness of the job he was called to do as well as rejoices in God’s protection and deliverance.

Psychologically, we can identify with Jeremiah. No one wants to be, by virtue of what God calls them do, thrust continually into situations of conflict, risking life and limb. We can understand him wriggling uncomfortably under the burden of the call. I think there’s probably an element too of personality. There are some people who seem always caught up in complaint and lamentation, and it wouldn’t matter if they were in a field of flowers it would still be a dung heap – perhaps it’s hopeful that God’s call to Jeremiah fits perfectly with his disposition!

Leaving aside issues of Jeremiah’s personality and how he wrestled with his vocation, it’s good for us to hear this call story at the end of our Planned Giving and stewardship month, because it underlines for us some of the reflections we’ve been engaged in through this time. What this story affirms is God’s purpose for Jeremiah. Before he was even conceived, God’s hand was overshadowing his life with a specific and unique identity to be lived and a job to do. That’s enormously hopeful for us each: that from before we were born until the last breath we draw, and for some few perhaps even beyond the grave, we each are tasked with something unique, a unique call God has for us to live. Some of us identify this early on, and some of us take our whole lives to work it out. But it’s still something that if we are able to listen and hear the still small voice of God, we will be able to tune into that divine purpose. Jeremiah was only able to receive God’s call (and know God was calling him) because he was listening. And when he did receive the call it was like coals being lit and bursting into flame in his very bones. That sounds to me like the anointing of the Holy Spirit, the flame of God’s love burning, the all consuming fire the writer to the Hebrews describes which purifies and enlivens and breathes in and through God’s people. That fire in the bones can’t be lived out half-heartedly; it demands that our all be directed to fulfilling God’s calling and living the work God has for one to do. It means being constantly attentive to the pull of that energy, listening to God in prayer (not just talking to God). And it means that the fire in the bones is the lens through which we make our choices in stewarding our time and talents and energies.

The affirmation of calling is not just an individual thing. Jeremiah’s call suggests to us that we as a church community have an identity and purpose God’s calling us to (or to renew), something which is like fire in our bones, something unique to us as St Margaret’s, something by which God’s voice is to be carried into and heard by our community. That mission is shaped firstly by our identity – by who God calls us to be as God’s people, and then by what that identity propels us towards. It means that as those called into deep relationship with God, treasuring that connection, we identify where God wants to send us, and then having listened and discerned that direction, we put our all towards it, going with and following the Holy Spirit’s fire in our bones.

Of course during this month we’ve been encouraging all of us to consider what and how we give back to God as individuals. The aim is that we will all pledge a portion of our income, and our time and our gifts to serve God through ministry here at St Margaret’s. I’ve spoken in previous weeks about the tithe, 10% as the biblical model for giving, and recommend it again – those who are faithful to God’s call never lack for anything. If you feel unable to give 10% (not just to St M’s but as a total of what you give to God), then the invitation is to give another 1%. Generosity breeds and develops generosity.

What this reminder about Jeremiah’s call suggests to us today is that the question of how that fire in our bones, the all consuming fire of the Spirit, applies to us as a church community, calling us away from our own agendas and inviting us to dream God’s much bigger dreams – and to be prepared to commit our all to pursuing God’s dreams for us and our community and world. What if listening to God meant each of our groups, instead of focusing on their own interests and pursuits, united around the one mission God’s calling us into? What if that fire ignited all our bones? I’m going to be bold and suggest that it would mean the topics at Faith Issues were to do with the mission God has for us. The Ladies’ Fellowship and Anglicare Parish Partnerships groups would fundraise and direct their activities to promote and support and engage with it. The property team would be considering how the site and our physical resources contribute to making the dream possible. The communications team would be looking at how we promote and market that ministry. Do Justice would be involved with a passion to see lives transformed by enacting God’s justice. Parish Council would have it as an agenda item each month, and actively talk about it in our reports and in Parish Matters. The Creating Spirit and Dabblers groups would be doing creative stuff and reflective things to support, develop and engage with this new ministry. You can see this is about much more than whether you put $5 in the plate. It is far more about how our priorities, our resources, our energies, our sense of identity and calling as God’s people, align with that “fire in the bones”. That requires a willingness to listen to hear God’s voice and call, and an equal willingness to then follow where God’s calling us to go, even if it means taking painful steps of letting go of some of our own dearly held agendas, patterns, habits, and comforts. If we can have the courage to live the vocation God has for us, letting go of these things will lead to new life in the Spirit, we let go of them for the sake of that new life coming to be, and coming to be, moreover in and through us. It’s not something to be feared (like the ancient Israelites who trembled at Sinai at the fire of God on the mountain), but embraced, because that Spirit of God in our bones yes, compels us forward in mission – but always to bring God’s gifts of peace, protection, hope, joy, love, faithfulness, gentleness, kindness, self-control, patience and transformation. May we have grace to hear God’s call and respond with all that we are and have.

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**