

Sermon for the 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity.

Jeremiah 15:15-21 and Matthew 16:21-end

Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do they need to happen at all? Is it not seemingly the nicest and the kindest people who have the accidents and the hardship and get the illnesses, while the cruel and selfish ones have all the luck? What is the point of being good, then? Where is God in all of this? Should he not make it all better?

These are questions I hear quite often in one form or another, and I'm sure you do, too, as well as think them for yourself. While other creatures simply get on with their lives and accept the consequences of existence, we get to ask questions about meaning and purpose and the whole point of it all. It's called religion, and it's what makes us *homo sapiens*, or wise men compared to our evolutionary ancestors. It makes us aware of ultimate significance. And it bothers us.

It bothered Jeremiah, too, when he complained to God in our reading today that his was something of a hard life, despite doing the things God wanted of him. "I suffer reproach for your sake," he said. "I never sat in the company of revellers ... why is my pain unending?" It seems he thought that he should be rewarded for his efforts and be having a rather easier time of things. Instead he felt his treatment at God's hands was a bit harsh.

Jesus' message to his followers was similarly harsh. Self-denial, suffering, and death were what he offered, along with a stiff rebuke for trying to suggest otherwise. But the rewards would be significant and eternal rather than simple and short-lived.

If you have the capacity to grasp something more to life than merely being alive, then perhaps you should behave as if that were important and look to the state of your soul. A comfortable long life may be desirable, but it is not worth the cost of a soulless existence.

If Jesus himself were to conquer death and win salvation for mankind then this was going to be a costly exercise. Ultimate reward would take everything he had to offer, including his life, and he made it clear that he expected the same from his disciples to show that God stops at nothing to redeem us and is concerned with more than just daily trivia. Now that surely is worth knowing.

Give of yourself for the sake of others. It will be worth it for them and for you.

In fact, everyone experiences both good and bad, joy and disappointment, pleasure and pain in individual measure and in our own timescale. We might make comparisons between ourselves and jump to our own conclusions about what is fair or unfair, but we should be careful in so doing that we do not miss the point of what it is to be created, sustained, and redeemed by a loving God.

God's reassuring reply to Jeremiah was that he should continue to do the right things and put his trust in God's promise: "I am with you ... I will save you."

And Jesus' careful explanations remind us that salvation is God's concern and to everyone's benefit. Whatever the content of our individual lives and experience, we should try to be worthy of that, try to be a little bit nicer, and try, perhaps, to be a little less selfish. Following Jesus and listening to God's word may not guarantee you an easy ride, but it may just make things a little easier for those around you.

Amen.