

Sermon: EP 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020: Ezekiel 12.21-13.16 Acts 19.1-20

We are living through the fourth industrial revolution. A revolution based not on fossil fuels or mass production but on information. The giants of this revolution are companies like Apple, Facebook and Google. Their profits are greater than many countries and their ecosystems affect almost every aspect of our lives. Their currency is data and it is sometimes overwhelming to think about how much data they hold on almost every person on the planet. Many of us struggle to fight our way through the jungle of statistics, and particularly so at the moment as governments and individuals wrestle with the pandemic. Not all data is good data and as ordinary people we sometimes have difficulty assessing the value of the information in front of us. The blizzard of statistics seems to provide ample opportunities for misinformation and conspiracy theories. Many are suspicious of information, knowledge, experts and the media. And sadly, some politicians exploit that scepticism.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that when some people suggest that the Bible and politics don't mix, he wondered what Bible they were reading. Our first reading from the Book of Ezekiel is a case in point. It talks about that nature of public discourse. About who had a real grasp of the realities that Israel faced.

In this reading, many of the prophets in Israel stand condemned. Today we might call them spin doctors or influencers. Some of them have been telling Israel that it doesn't need to worry. Prophets like Jeremiah had warned of hard times but the false prophets said that these were a long way off. Ezekiel, however, is told by God to tell a different story. The time is now he says. The moment is urgent. The nation cannot be complacent. False prophets have given their lies credibility by adding 'says the Lord' but the Lord has not said these things. In fact, the Lord is saying quite the opposite. They have said there is peace when there is no peace. They have whitewashed walls, making them look good, but those walls have been weak and will not shelter the nation when the storms come.

Today marks the start of the season of Creationtide which runs until our Harvest Festival on 4<sup>th</sup> October. During this time we are encouraged to think and pray about God's creation and our place in it. And there is a real urgency about this. Our planet is warming at a dangerous rate. We are seeing the effect of extreme weather around the world. Fires and floods. The melting of the icecaps. The impact on crop production and food scarcity. We are preoccupied by the effects of the pandemic at the moment but global warming cannot be left as something to be dealt with when this is all over. The time is now. The moment is urgent. We cannot go back to business as usual.

It is tempting for some politicians and companies to disguise their real priorities with what is called greenwash. To speak the language of environmentalism while doing the exact opposite. Fortunately, the prophets of our age, many of them young, are good at calling out these subterfuges. Using data to show whether words are matched by actions. In our second reading from the Book of Acts, we hear of people trying to use the name of Jesus to exorcise demons without actually believing in him. Using Jesus like a brand, a product, rather than a way of life. We might draw some parallels with Donald Trump holding a Bible outside St John's Church in Washington during the Black Lives Matter campaign in June this year. Or President Putin and his close connections with the Russian Orthodox Church. In the Book of Acts, the fake exorcists are exposed by the demons they are trying to expel. We will have to see what happens in our own time.

The new world of data is something we are all going to have to come to terms with. We will need to have a better understanding what is good, reliable data and what is bad. We will need to recognise when data is being used to shine a light and when it is being used to manipulate or misinform. In the deluge of information we will need to seek truth.

And that is the work of both the intellect and the soul. That sifting demands that we engage both our brains and our hearts, our guts. As Christians it requires us to take the issues of our day to God in prayer. To allow his light to shine on every aspect of life. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says 'there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, nor anything secret that will not come to light.' Certainly, that's been my experience as a priest. Secrets can be corrosive and they come to light eventually. And when they do there can be healing and new life.

I am sad that sometimes the church has kept secrets. Has been fearful of the truth. Sometimes it has built walls around itself, trying to protect itself instead of others. But hopefully we are learning to be more open now. More willing to admit mistakes. Because in our new information age there can be few secrets. A mature faith is strong enough to hear the truth. To speak it, even when that is costly. To live it. Jesus said, you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. So many people seem to be searching for truth at the moment. And in today's world, more than ever, we need to be people of truth. Following Jesus, who is the way the truth and the light and setting others free. Amen.