

St. Michael's Parish Church
Sunday 1st February 2009
Deuteronomy 18: 15-20, 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13, Mark 1: 21-28

Last week we heard the story of Jonah and the big fish. We heard that Jonah went to Nineveh and prophesied not God's words, but his own frustrations and irritations. We heard that he was very disappointed with God's mercy when God did not carry out the destruction that Jonah prophesied against Nineveh. As a consequence Jonah lay down and expected to die.

This morning the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy explains why Jonah expected to die. The verses we read from Deuteronomy lay down that very punishment for people who call themselves prophets and prophesy falsely in the name of God. Jonah didn't die though – God was as merciful to him as he had been to Nineveh.

Prophets in the Old Testament could be dangerous people. They had something to say about everything from social justice to whether or not a king should go to war or with whom the nation should make a treaty. The judgements of the prophets were made on the basis of their predictions about future outcomes. Kings and individuals were more likely to listen to prophets who had positive and encouraging things to say about the future, although prophets who predicted doom could influence the decisions people made just as much. The point for us today is to appreciate that prophets had a huge influence over others, just as the book of Jonah showed us last week.

Because of the influence that the prophets could have the law books of the Old Testament, books like Deuteronomy, contain very strict regulations concerning prophets. Not just anyone could rise up and be a prophet to influence the future direction of a society. The law books of the Old Testament outline what a prophet should say, how a prophet should act and even sometimes what a prophet should look like. That way kings and people could be more certain they were hearing the word of God – the right prophecy - and not just something that someone had made up.

Deuteronomy, and other books in the Old Testament, is in effect the state regulator of prophets. If you are a prophet and you abide by its regulations then you are much more likely to get a sympathetic hearing amongst the people to whom you are prophesying. Or at least you are much more likely to stay on the right side of the law.

The same is true today – as we have found out over the past year. Capitalist economies rely on the ability of those who trade in shares to predict accurately the future value of companies' earnings. A share trader will buy or sell shares in a company on the basis of whether that company is likely to make larger or smaller profits in the future.

As we have discovered over the past year share traders are often not very good at this and many are often unscrupulous. Some are as likely to take your money and invest it on the basis of inaccurate information, as they are to take your money, invest it and make a good return on your money. The cumulative effect of these prophetic judgements or misdemeanours can have a very influential effect on leaders, individuals and the fate of entire nations – can they not?

It is not surprising then that there is a need for law making and regulation to govern the actions of our modern day prophets in the stock market. Just like those who warned us about the future in the Bible we also need to be sure that those who predict the future today are speaking with some knowledge, honesty and authority.

In our Gospel reading this morning we heard that Jesus spoke with authority and that was what people found attractive about him. His authority came not so much from his ability to predict future events with a greater degree of accuracy than prophets or market traders, but on his ability to focus less on opportunities in the future and more on the well being of people living in the present.

As we heard last week Jesus didn't say the Kingdom of God is on its way, I predict, in the future – he wasn't so interested in the future. He said the Kingdom of God is

here now. It has arrived. When analysing the moral state of his society – how just it was, how merciful, how peace loving it was, Jesus didn't do what prophets had done before and take a guess at what the future outcomes might be if we carried on living as we have done. He made judgements based on the state of the nation and on the state of people's lives now – the lives of people around him, the lives of people he encountered - because the Kingdom of God had now arrived.

So because he was concerned with what was happening in the present, because he was focused on the present and not on making a guess about the future its no surprise to find him, as we do in the reading this morning, casting out demons even as he spoke.

In a way we can even see how this approach works in our markets and our economy today. One of the main criticisms of those who have helped bring about the credit crunch is that they created a bubble by attempting to manipulate the future value of companies by buying and selling shares based on future value alone, rather than look at the state of companies in the hear and now.

Never mind what they might be like in the future, how are they now, is what the traders should have asked. The answer to that question was that banks were hugely over valued and under financed.

Jesus calls us to assess the value of our society now, not against the future, but against the well being of our societies' people in the present. He casts out demons today, he doesn't wait for them to leave tomorrow.

What are the demons in our society that we should be casting out today – no matter about tomorrow? This week is Poverty and Homelessness Action Week. Those who are concerned about the poor and the homeless in our society are clear that the demons which face those on the edge of society are, in particular:

- a lack of affordable housing;

- low pay;

- street homelessness;

asylum destitution;

fuel poverty and rural poverty.

These are the principle causes of homelessness in Scotland.

Those people who are living on the edge of our society and who suffer from these demons are most likely to be people who are:

young or inexperienced;

people who are old;

people who have learning disabilities;

people who have mental illness;

people who have lived in institutions of some kind or another;

and people who have experienced domestic violence.

How different would the world be if instead of trying to manipulate the future in the hope of future utopia of wealth and well-being we asked those who met at the World Economic Forum in Davos this week instead to believe that, as Jesus taught, the Kingdom of God is here today, demons need to be cast today from those who live not at the heart of our societies, but those who live on the edge.

A recession is no time to abandon the poor and the homeless to the future. The Kingdom of God is here now and demons need to be exorcised from those who are, in a recession, even more isolated.

St. Michael's as a congregation played its part in doing that on Friday night when it supported Bethany Christian Trust's Care Shelter and provided the Shelter with a Catering Team to feed those on Friday night who needed a hot meal more than anyone else in Edinburgh – and St. Michael's will do the same again in March.

If you would like to do more you could do three things: you could pray, using the prayer card that is with the order of service this morning; you could make contact with the housing agency to find out more about the issues and raise awareness of them; you could give a little of your time and money to helping solve the scourge of poverty and homelessness.

As those who met at Davos know, for many reasons the world is probably best governed by free markets and liberal democracies. Our lives are better when we are free. But, freedom comes at a price. It isn't a free-for-all. Free markets, the freedom to predict the future, like the prophecies of the prophets of old, need good regulations and individual freedom needs good laws to banish the demons of a free society. Or as Paul said in the letter to the church in Corinth that we read this morning,

'But be careful that this liberty of yours does not become a pitfall for the weak.'