

Life as it is

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

In his wonderful comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde writes about the confusion about two couples, engaged to be married, and at one point the two girls are not quite sure who is engaged to whom. Initially a little suspicious of each other, then covering things over with the “shallow mask of manners”, the confusion grows and some straight talking is required. One says to the other: “On an occasion of this kind it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one’s mind. It becomes a pleasure.”

Who do you go to when you want someone to tell you the honest truth? Who do you avoid when you know there’s an honest truth needing told, but you don’t want to hear it?

The ability to and the need for someone to tell life as it is can often be a two-edged sword. Being told how life is can liberate you, and it can crush you. Being told how life is can clear the air, and it can cause so much conflict and ill-feeling that it becomes hard to breathe.

Paul advises the Ephesian Christians to ‘speak the truth in love’, but whenever someone advises says, “if I may speak the truth in love”, you know it’s advisable to duck. But what are we supposed to do? When, in hard times, we are called on to face up to facts, or make hard decisions, with people that we like and agree with, and people that we don’t like and don’t agree with?

Are there times in relationships, or business, or politics, when it is best to get it all out in the open, and say what you really think and feel, or are there times when it is more prudent to bite your tongue to keep the peace? How are we supposed to strike a balance? Life as it is, is complex, filled with ups and downs, and contradictions.

This is what we find in the teaching of the Bible. It tells us the truth about life as it is. Sometimes it is filled with blessing; sometimes it is filled with woe. Sometimes it is smooth and sweet; sometimes it is rough and bitter. Life is easy and hard, and it is rarely straightforward. We look for a steady progression from A to B to C, but we all know it does not work that way.

“The prophet Jeremiah stood in the midst of a time of transition. His career as a prophet began in the shadow of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. It ended in a time of exile. The prophet’s message is a challenging one. Do we trust in ourselves, or do we trust in God? Do we say to ourselves, “Life is all about me”? Or do we say, and mean it, that life is all about God. Are we people living and wrestling with faith, or are we, in reality, functional atheists, going through the motions of belief out of habit? It’s what makes Jeremiah uncomfortable to listen to – and it’s why he had a rough time in his own generation. He tells life as it is.

When we ought to be talking and thinking about God, we are often talking and thinking about ourselves. We speak of me and my faith, my spiritual seeking, my doing good for the poor, my vision for the future of the Church, my mood of gratitude. God may even get stitched on to the fabric somewhere, but perhaps in a merely decorative way. It’s what’s expected, isn’t it? But it’s not, in the end, faith. God is not motif; God is core.

We all do it, talk or play the pious game, we maybe even use religious language, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that we are being truthful about what we believe, or even honest and meaningful about the living God.

God is on to us, and spiky, prickly characters like Jeremiah tell us this. God is testing and searching our hearts and our minds. No one is excluded from examination. Hearts can be fickle, until they are tested. If our faith and our religion are to be believed and lived truly, then they will affect our hearts, and our minds; our motivation and our reasoning; and ultimately, how we act. Our actions reflect our fundamental loyalties, loves, and dispositions more accurately than we care to admit.

When Jesus is recorded giving His Sermon on the Plain in Luke’s Gospel, it is a raw, unvarnished faith-rattling declaration of God’s Kingdom. Matthew has a Sermon on the Mount, where we look up to Jesus. Luke has a Sermon on the Plain, where we find Jesus amongst us. It is spoken to people who have made, or are in the process of making, a commitment in faith. This is Jesus giving a call to action. Jesus speaks to challenge us to ask what it is that we value

and what it is that we reject in relation to how we live life as a Christian. With the blessings and the woes, everyone listening should be squirming. This is Jesus telling us how life is.

And this is Jesus not looking down on us from a mountain top with lofty ideals to which we should aspire. This is Jesus looking up at us, as if to say, what are you doing with your life right this very minute? People are sick and dying here, tormented by misery. They are found all over the world, and right on our doorstep, maybe right here in Church today. Will you get down on your knees, says Jesus, and help Me?

The blessings Jesus talks about are not aspirations to being godly, they are about a community of disciples, a church, standing with the grieving, the poor, the hungry of the land, as Jesus does. They are about practising the presence of Jesus through acts of care and compassion. Christian life begins with ministry, not with belief. That is life as it is.

When we look to the future of the Church, nationally or locally, we are called to demonstrate how we, in our time, know what life really is, and how we relate to the people around us in our community and the lives they are leading. Are they hungry for beauty and music and a worship that makes them think and feel? Are they hungry for company and welcome and friendship? Are they hungry for something that is accessible and fun and relevant? Are they hungry for mystery and wonder? Are they hungry for a place of sanctuary, when they can escape the phone, the email, the demands of family and work and mortgage and financing debt, and simply be in a place and space where they can reflect, and contemplate? Are they simply hungry, and cannot put a name on what it is that is lacking in their lives and making them feel hungry, but knowing that life as it is for them at this moment is not enough? Without being able to articulate it, are they hungry for God? You, at least, have made it into this sanctuary. Are you hungry for God?

Living life as it is requires us to strike a balance. We must not be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use; but conversely we must not be of such earthly use that we are no longer heavenly minded.

Jesus tells us the truth, plainly, of what faithful living is going to be like. He tells us to live life as it is, with its blessings and woes. We cannot say after today that we have not been plainly

advised. Nor can we say that after today, having heard Jesus, God has not revealed Who God is, and what God is calling us to do and to be.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen