

Midweek sermon: 11-3-21

Good morning and welcome to our midweek service today.

XXX God seems to be saying one word to us at the moment, over and over. That word is obedience.

It came through in our Sunday series in Luke. It was magnified at the beginning of the Archbishops call to pray for the nation in the pandemic. I was drawn to the passage in Nehemiah where the lead character of that book here's about the state of the city of Jerusalem and its broken-down walls. His response was to pray – not just for himself but to repent for his nation and generations before.

Passages came up from Deuteronomy 4 *"Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you."* (Deut 4:1-2) and Deut 7 *"9 Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. 10 But*

those who hate him he will repay to their face by destruction; he will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate him.

11 Therefore, take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give you today." (Deut 7:9-11)

What is plain is the God demands obedience.

He requires us to follow his commands. Jesus said the same. "Go, make disciples...teach them all I have commanded". Jesus himself gave dozens of commands. The Father gave many more, through Moses, through the prophets, through the law. All for us to obey and live the life that he wants us to have, in this world and the next.

Today's readings continue this theme. Jesus is being asked by whose authority he drives out demons. In essence "Who are you obeying when you do these things?". He is accused of obeying the command of Beelzebul – the devil or Satan – to drive out the demons of Satan. That makes no sense, he says, for why would the evil one drive out evil? *"20 But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."* (Luke 11:20) No, my authority comes from Goodness, the God who is your Father, and through this you get a glimpse of the kingdom that is to come.

Jeremiah, in our first passage, similarly highlights this choice. With God or against him. There is no middle way. *"I gave them this command: obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you. 24 But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts."* (Jer 7:23-24)

The nation of Israel is charged with going backwards. Jeremiah is to bring to them one particular ailment that leads to this rebellion. *"This is the nation that has not obeyed the Lord its God or responded to correction. Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips."* (Jer 7:28)

Xxxxxx There is one truth. Not my truth or your truth. But one truth. God's truth. For in his son he was able to claim "I am the way **the truth** and the life". That is not a popular notion these days. But it is a biblical one.

I can say "obey God" in sermon after sermon, but how do we do that? What does disobeying God look like? In asking that question, what I started to see was places where disobedience to God meant someone was obeying something else.

Often our rebellion is to obey an idea that is contrary to God. That idea is therefore a lie.

I have three examples. Listed.....

XXXXX My son is studying Romeo and Juliet at school. The story of the star-crossed lovers. The reason they cannot be together is that the two families, Juliet's Capulets and Romeo's Montagues, are in a continuing feud. Each family hates the other because, well they just have, for living memory. The idea of the evil Capulet/Montague in the hearts of the Montague/Capulet (delete as appropriate) leads them to neither love their enemy nor love their neighbour as themselves, as Jesus would command. Instead they fight and dismiss, regardless of the actual person before them.

Based on that lie – the idea that anyone of the other clan is instantly dishonourable and evil, the play ends tragically and reconciliation ensues. The lie is dispelled, yet it is too late for Juliet and Romeo who bring this about.

Disobedience to God, wrought of a lie, of a distorted idea.

Xxxxxx Studying history of Germany from 1919-1933 led us to look at the treatment of Jews and other minorities in Germany and across Europe. Hitler sold a lie. His distrust of Jews and attempted genocide is well known. He also believed that "One ought to cast the utmost doubt on the state-building power of the Slavs" His policy of *lebensraum*, or making room to live for pure born Germans by conquering east did **not** contemplate bringing in Slavs of Poland, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union into the greater Germany. The reason was that he considered them *untersmenshen* or sub humans. Inferior in every way to the Aryan race.

Obedience to this idea, this lie, led to 6 years of war, atrocities uncounted and millions of dead.

Xxxxxxx This idea of sub-humanity, humanity that is inferior, stains the history of this great nation too. In his book (also a BBC series available on i-player), *Black and British*, David Olusoga prefaces by weaving through British history identifying various points where black people, invisible in inherited histories, were not only present but often pivotal.

He spends quite a few pages describing in some detail Bunce Island. You will find this today in Sierra Leone. It was a slave compound and fortress. The local traders would capture slaves and take them to Bunce Island where the ocean-going ships would dock and load their cargo, to transport them to the Americas and Caribbean. The opulence of the trader's quarters, cheek by Jowell with the compound is stark. Detail upon detail eloquently tells of the degradation of these newly caught human beings. Shown off to the traders to get maximum price. The men that is. The women were taken to the "rape house".

It's a shocking story.

I look forward to hearing the positive story of how Britain, Africa and the Caribbean have been intertwined throughout history. A history told not by the oppressor, and therefore a largely white history, but for all. I need to be prepared for further revelations that I won't want to hear or that will make me uncomfortable. They should.

At my previous church we followed a series on ethical dilemmas and Christian responses to them. Led by John Stott's marvellous book on the subject, I preached on the passage regarding race.

I knew that we had a history of slavery. I knew that it had been abolished through the work of Christian men in the 19th century. I was not prepared for the attempts to justify it. A slave is "a person who is the property of another, whose will is subject to the owner's authority and whose labour is obtained through coercion". Regarded as movable property slaves had their elementary rights removed. Defence through the ages of the practice of slavery included:

Necessity – insufficient local labour in the colonies to fuel the industrial revolution demand

Racial superiority – deserved no better

Biblical permission – there was slavery in the bible

Human benefit – African savages were taken to American civilisation

Missionary opportunity – the pagan Africans could be brought to Christianity

Intellectual arguments to justify all these excuses included:

Africans were dissimilar and so were a different species – not human, more like an animal (Edward Long 1774 and JJ Guenbault 1837)

Black people were like children – incapable of adult thought or maturity – Ulrich Phillips 1918

These are lies.

These excuses are lies. The scientific theories are lies.

They are distorted ideas. Obedience to them led to great evil.

And that continues today in our structures and assumptions. Black people today can tell me that they are treated as inferiors in small and larger, more blatant ways. Many strides have been made towards a more multi-cultural Britain and world. But the lies and excuses that lead to oppression continue.

This has been highlighted again by recent comments that a dark skin in the Royal family may have been worthy of comment and concern.

Xxxxxx Our PCC has made the first steps towards an intention to not only talk about diversity but also to search for and try to eradicate the barriers that might stop us having every opportunity to bless one another.

Some barriers will be obvious but most will be unconscious. PCC agreed to make this a standing item at every meeting so we do not lose sight. That we persevere and move towards the goal that Christ Church can be truly diverse where everyone has opportunities to bless others, and to be blessed, whoever we are.

xxxxxxxAs Paul wrote to the Galatians "26 *So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,* 27 *for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* 28 *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* 29 *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.* (Gal 3:26-29)

Paul does not hold truck with hierarchies or superior/inferior relationships. When we come to faith we become a child of God, one equal part of the body of Christ, an image bearers.

All of us.

Paul addresses imbalance and hierarchies in many places – children obey your parents, Father's do not exasperate your children; wives respect your husbands, husbands love your wives; obey the authorities, authorities be subject to God. Even where society put in hierarchies Paul subjected them to Christ and made all equal. He is particularly scathing for the Corinthian church who held table to share the Lord's supper in a way *"that did more harm than good"* (1 Cor 11:17) Their disobedience? The rich would have private suppers indoors and the poor, slaves and menial workers would go hungry in the courtyard. Some "despised the church of God by humiliating those who had nothing" (v22).

The idea of superiority is a lie. It is human to want to be superior to someone else. It is a deception. It is a temptation. It is dis-obedience.

We are called to obey.

What idea are you following? Is it God's idea, yours or somebody else's. Anything not of God is not truth. And therein lies the path to disobedience, to follow a lie.

Ask God for his truth. And obey...

Let's pray....

Luke 11:14-23

Jesus and Beelzebul

¹⁴ Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed. ¹⁵ But some of them said, 'By Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons.' ¹⁶ Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven.

¹⁷ Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: '**Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall.**' ¹⁸ If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebul. ¹⁹ Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. ²⁰ But **if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.**

²¹ 'When **a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe.**

²² But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which the man trusted and divides up his plunder.

²³ **'Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.'**

Jeremiah 7:23-28

New International Version - UK

²² For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, ²³ but I gave them this command: **obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people.** Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you. ²⁴ But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. **They went backwards and not forwards.** ²⁵ From the time your ancestors left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. ²⁶ But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their ancestors."

²⁷ 'When you tell them all this, they will not listen to you; when you call to them, they will not answer. ²⁸ Therefore say to them, "This is the nation that has not obeyed the LORD its God or responded to correction. **Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips.**