



**Sermon preached by Dr Janet Bottoms on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2025**

**Readings: Jeremiah 29: 1, 4 -7; Luke 17: 11 -19; 2 Timothy 2: 8 -15**

“Now on his way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee.” That was probably a kind of no man’s land, with a few scattered villages and no clear line of demarcation. Certainly the group of men who called to Jesus as he was passing was mixed, drawn together by a situation in common; regarded, ritually, as “unclean”; and cast out - excluded from normal social activity. They appear to have heard accounts or rumours of Jesus as a healer, however, so they stood in the open, “keeping their distance” from the crowd, and called, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.”

Mercy. It’s a word that can have several meanings – pity, forgiveness, compassion, even kindness, though Jesus’s response seems more abrupt than kindly. “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” That would be in accordance with the instructions in the Book of Leviticus for a man who knew or believed himself to be free of the disease. The priest would inspect him and if he did appear “clean”, would give him official confirmation and the right to renewed “normal” life. But these men had no reason to suppose a priest could help them, and Jesus had done nothing – apparently - so, why did they go? Perhaps it was just a faint hope – “worth a try”, “something to do” - and on the way the signs of leprosy disappeared from their bodies. They were “clean”, free to go home, go back to work and to live normally again.

Just one man turned back Presumably this was not because he wasn’t as eager as the rest to be free again, “normal” again; but even as he realized, like the others, that he had been healed, he must have been filled with such an overwhelming sense of what had been given him, such a deep recognition of the mercy of God working through the mercy of the man Jesus, that he could not go on his way without acknowledging it. It was grace; free, unearned mercy. Compassion; I prefer that word because it carries the idea of empathy, of suffering with and for the sufferer - the compassion of God seen in the compassion of a man. So this man turned back, praising God with a loud voice and prostrating himself at Jesus’s feet, and Jesus said “Get up, and go on your way: your faith has made you well.” Because of your faith you are made well; and here the word used is not the same one as for “healed”. It carries the wider sense of saved, set free, whole, made well - new made. It is your faith that has given you this new birth into a new future and hope, says Jesus.

We find something of the same idea -- of new life, new hope – in our Old Testament reading, but there it is offered not just to a few but to a “people”, the rulers and leading figures of an entire nation, who had been carried off to exile in Babylon, At a time of geo-political upheaval, of competing Empires, when, as Psalm 46 puts it, “the nations were in uproar, kingdoms crumbled”, they had been sure that they would be all right. Wasn’t God’s temple in Jerusalem; their king in Zion? Weren’t they the “chosen” ones?

They had been warned by Jeremiah that they were bringing disaster on themselves, but they had rejected him and his message so they were now in a state of shock.- “strangers in a strange land” - cut off from everything that had given their lives meaning. Now Jeremiah’s letter was telling them to look forward and act positively. “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters... multiply there”. In this new, strange land they were to make a fresh start, but – and it was an important but, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Jeremiah’s letter was God’s word, explicitly intended to give them hope; a message that was in total contrast to his earlier ones when he denounced the injustice, the greed, the idolatry and yet the complacency of the people. It was a new note for Jeremiah, too. He had spent years denouncing the greed and blindness of the leading figures in the old land who had sought only their own welfare. Now they were to be “made well” again; to remember the essence of their God-given Law, and not

only follow it but extend the idea of “neighbour” to those people among whom they were now to live. For “I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you; plans to give you a hope and a future.” God was still with them, even here, even in this disaster they had created for themselves. God’s compassion and God’s faithfulness are the message, the theme, that runs through and through the Bible. “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness”. The message gives hope, it promises a future, but it requires trust, faith, and it directs action. “ Seek the welfare of the city for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

This is where we turn to the letter from Paul to Timothy; from Paul, in prison in Rome, nearing the end of his life, to Timothy, a young man, bearing great responsibility. Earlier in the letter Paul had encouraged him to “guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” He had warned him that there would be people, even in the church, who would attack or dispute with him. Sometimes he would feel very alone. But he was not alone, Paul reminds him. “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead ... that is my gospel.” That was the key, the heart of his whole message. It was for that that Paul had suffered persecution and was in prison, in chains. “BUT - the word of God is not chained.” The Word of God. The Word that was “with God and that was God,” Paul’s hope and the hope of the world. “A hope and a future,” in the words of Jeremiah to the exiles. “In his name shall the nations hope,” as Isaiah had written of the Suffering Servant. Compassion, Healing, Hope, *unchained* – freely offered to all who would recognise it and accept it. That, says Paul, is why he is prepared to suffer everything – for the sake of those who are drawn to Jesus, to the Word, “so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ.” That is why Timothy must discourage narrow and unhelpful theological or verbal disputes. That is why, as a worker approved by God, he must explain the word of truth “rightly”; and that is why Paul returns to the promise of God, summed up in “a saying that is sure”.

That “saying” is generally seen by commentators as an early Christian hymn or “spiritual song”. “If we have died with him, we will also live with him; If we endure, we will also reign with him; If we deny him, he will also deny us.” That, of course, recalls the words of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel - his warning of a time of trouble and persecution to come; and it sounds a warning; but we can picture the small, early churches, confidently expressing their faith and their hope as they press on to the last line: “If we are faithless, he remains faithful!”

Surely that doesn’t follow. “If we have died with him, we will also live with him; If we endure with him we will also reign with him. If we deny him he will also deny us.” It is simple, logical, fair; but “if we are faithless, he remains faithful.” Surely that breaks the logical progression; it makes no sense. Then comes the clincher, the proof, the incontrovertible truth; “for he cannot deny himself”. “These words are sure,” says Paul. They carry assurance.

Let’s return to the story of the healing of the man who had leprosy. Jesus met him, healed him, assured him that it was his faith that had made him well “ on the road to Jerusalem”, that is on Jesus’s own lonely road to betrayal, and crucifixion. Knowing all that was to come, Jesus “set his face” to go to Jerusalem. He was faithful. Even when he knew that the hour had come; even though he prayed “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless” – nevertheless “Thy will be done.” He could not be unfaithful. He could not deny himself. He was “faith-full”.

He was also compassionate. In the garden of Gethsemane, he asks the disciples to “watch” with him; to “watch and pray, that you don’t enter into temptation”; that you do not have to face this test yourselves, this trial of your faithfulness - but they fall asleep. They are overcome by human weakness. “Could you not watch with me one hour?” Jesus says, in human disappointment, human loneliness, but not condemnation. Judas arrives with soldiers and kisses him to show them which is the man they want. Jesus says to him, “Friend, do what you are here to do.” My friend: I understand. The Roman soldiers nail him to the cross and he prays, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” The mockers at Golgotha say, “He saved others; he cannot save himself.” It was true. He could not deny himself.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever”, wrote the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, and the early church sang “he remains faithful for he cannot deny himself.”

Jesus is compassionate; Jesus is the Word – word of his Father, “become flesh”, “full of grace and truth” - and God, is compassionate. It is God’s compassion and faithfulness that Jesus embodies. It runs through the prophets; it runs through and through the Bible. In the Book of Lamentations, we can read the cry of any sufferer. “The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him.”

And what of us? Can we say the same; live in the light of hope? Do we feel “strangered” by the world around us, no longer at home in it; afraid of or for the future? When we hear or watch the news the world can seem very dark; yet we forget so quickly. Is there going to be relief for Gaza? New hope, a future? We have forgotten Ukraine; we have forgotten the Sudan. We have forgotten yesterday’s news; the pain, the grief brought right into our homes, on our screens. We feel so helpless. We are drawn to one side or another. We forget the long history

behind today’s struggles; the aspirations and the hopes, as well as the cruelty; the greed for power, for possession. We feel the paradox of faith in a God of compassion who yet appears to allow such suffering; but God has given man freedom, for good or for evil. God weeps over it as Jesus did – “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings but you were not willing.” Even our best attempts to create societies that seek justice and love mercy are flawed. To quote Tennyson:

Our little systems have their day; They have their day and cease to be:

They are but broken lights of thee, And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

Jeremiah’s message from God still stands. “Build and plant” where I have placed you; in the situation I have put you in or drawn you to: “Seek the welfare” of that place, that cause, and “pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare”- your light.

Can we ask “Lord, increase - or - strengthen our faith” as the disciples did, and learn to work and pray, faithfully, for the “welfare” of those to whom God directs us? Can we pray wholeheartedly, as Jesus taught his followers to do: “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth, while remembering that he also said “the kingdom is “within you”,\_and among you”?

Can we say “Maranatha” – as Paul does at the end of his letter to the Corinthian church.?

*Maranatha* - an Aramaic phrase – that translates as “Our Lord, Come!” or, depending on how

it is stressed, “Our Lord has come”. A cry? a prayer? or a shout of joyful realization? Plea or praise? Both are possible - both true – to share or to greet one another with. So I would like to finish by sharing with you some parts of a longer prayer by the Maranatha Community.

### **Maranatha. – Come, Lord Jesus.<sup>1</sup>**

You are the God /who comes / You do not /stay away / you are not / afar off .

You come to me / often unawares /gently entering / my life / to share / my joys , my pains, /

You come / to share my life /not to intrude/ nor to impose your will/

You come / speaking my language. / You come / sharing my pain. /

You come /with arms stretched out / upon a cross / and in the darkest hour /

You come / to bear / my burdens / and the heavy load / of an agonizing world /

crushed with anguish/ guilt and grief./

Thank you for coming /Lord / and in your mercy / Keep coming / Lord./

Come and tread the streets / of cruel cities / .

Come /and share the pain / of bloody battlefields. /  
Come / and cry out for food/ with those who starve.  
Come / and weep with / all the little ones / abused / rejected /And alone /  
Come / our Lord / and lead us out of darkness into light/  
Come / my Lord/ and walk /with me/ and reign /in me / and over /all the earth. /  
Come. Lord Jesus./ Come. Amen.

[Prayer from The Maranatha Community, *First Light: Prayers from New Christian Communities*,  
ed. Eldred Willey, Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001]

*Janet Bottoms: 17 August 2025*