

Over the years, I have come to realise just how important the Old Testament is for Christians: after all for the members of the Primitive Church for the first centuries or more of its existence it was their scriptures. But they interpreted it afresh in the life of Jesus and gradually added to it their own writings; the Gospels, the Acts and the letters of the Apostles, principally Paul but also John, James and Judas, and also that strange and mysterious book of the Revelation to John

Today the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Ezekiel speaks to us from a troubled time. Israel is in exile and struggling to keep together their identity and they blame the past.

**'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'.** (v3) It is the sins of past generations that have made this mess, not us. It's so convenient to blame the past, and not ourselves. And like a refrain, **'The way of the Lord is unfair.'** (v25, also v29)

Ezekiel focuses on the present, not the past and proclaims that God's problem is present, not past sin. **When the righteous turn away from their righteousness.**(v27) Here the prophet starts to open up a problem which applies to all societies, that of taking responsibilities for our own contemporary actions. He reminds his hearers that '**all lives are mine'** (v4) ; i.e. God's.

In the history of Ireland in the past few hundred years, there was a refrain that you could blame everything on the English. It explained poverty and famine, and the failure of successive governments to bring prosperity. Someone else was always to blame, not government policies that encouraged inefficiency in industry and commerce, that cut the country off from the world around it in a drive for an impossible self-sufficiency which for sixty years after independence made emigration the only escape for many from moral as well as financial poverty.

It is all too easy to blame others by denying our own responsibility and part in the life of society. Yes, Europe is still paying a horrible cost for the carving up of empires in vengeance for a Great War. The present conflict in Syria and Iraq stems ultimately from two army officers, Mark Sykes and Francois Picot sitting in a Damascus coffee shop in 1917 and drawing lines on a map which ran across established boundaries such as the Shia-Sunni divide, or that of Kurdish speakers who were left unwelcome minorities in no less than three countries. The aim was to share out the old Ottoman Empire between the British and the French when the World War ended. Syria and Lebanon were to be French, Palestine, Iraq and Jordan British. The irresponsibilities of that decision still affect us today because nobody wants to tackle the nettle of division they began.

God's way is not unfair: it is our failure to consciously mould the world into his image that is unfair and wrong. Ezekiel speaks to his hearers of a God who **says 'I have no pleasure in the death of the anyone'** (v32) The death he talks of is not just physical death but the spiritual and cultural withering brought about by alienation from God. God's cure is a simple one, **'Turn, then and live'**: not just physical, material breathing and eating life, but

emotional peace and freedom from anxiety, and a care and concern for your neighbour, and a viewpoint which sees God at work in all the world, for Ezekiel makes it clear that God takes no pleasure in the alienation of his children.

The prophet is making a profound plea for renewal of human society in his image of love. In today's world we should not see refugees from the most appalling atrocities living in squalid camps on the edge of societies that call themselves Christian. We should not see life-saving food aid used as a tool to obtain political ends, bureaucracy used as a hindrance to help for the needy. We should not have to experience where those suffer injustice cannot afford to take action because they cannot afford the fees demanded by lawyers to defend them.

Christians turn to Christ. We not only put the guidance and wisdom of Jesus into effect in our lives, but also claim that he is alive and that the spirit of God which filled his life dwells in us, and that Spirit is the spirit of the living God who takes no pleasure in alienation and pain. He works in and through us: if we are silent, he cannot speak. If we pass by on the other side, God's love is frustrated, and Jesus in his life reached out to the alienated, the neglected of his day, lepers, women, foreigners, convicted criminals with whom he shared death.

We are faced with the same challenge which faced Jesus' critics in our Gospel reading. If Jesus is whom he says he is, why are we not following his example. If a government calls itself Christian, why does it behave in an unchristian way? If it governs for the rich? If it panders to big business? If it is constantly seeking to be all things to all men, and achieves nothing, should we be surprised? Once we claim the name of Christ, we will be measured against him, and only faith can vindicate us. For God is on the side of the abandoned and displaced and despised: **'Truly I tell you, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you'.**

(Matthew 21 v 31)

Here in St Margaret of Scotland you have made the choice as a community to take Christ's path, with aid to the Mendekhaz which reaches out to refugees, or the Wings Foundation which helps young women with drug and alcohol problems which may drag them down quite literally into the gutter, a problem facing many in most European societies. It is going with a lorry full of apples to the needy to reach out to the stranger who has been cast upon your borders.

Jesus had no roof over his head. In Ireland one effect of the recent economic crisis has been the soaring price of housing in a society based on home ownership, and in which governments sold off a very substantial property portfolio in good times and used the cash, not to alleviate poverty but to lower taxes. Our own parish is actively supporting charities which are seeking to help the ultimate victims who find themselves in temporary accommodation or on the streets there to be assailed by the temptation of drugs and the health problems of sleeping rough in our damp and often cold climate, because the

government does not want to provide even enough hostel beds, for Jesus is where these people are.

Both our scripture readings today challenge our society on the issues of justice and compassion, and they challenge Christ's people today to live our faith in the world we live in. Those who say Christianity is for the past, and of no relevance in a world which has moved on are inhabiting a dream world and fail to see that the scripture is honoured because it speaks to all times, to all people and every human situation. God is a God of love: he transcends time and place, and in Jesus risen he is in all places to do what Jesus did, declare God's love to all who need to know it, because a so-called Christian society has forgotten or ignored them