

**The Church at Carrs Lane
Birmingham**

**Sunday 17th February 2019
Epiphany VI**

Sermon

Jeremiah 17.5-10; Psalm 1; Luke 6.17-26

Determining to ‘live as pilgrims’ is an impressive aspiration. But we don’t do it in an aseptic bubble. We do it, ‘here in the dust and joy of human life’. And that is at once both wondrous and woeful.

It’s wondrous because, on a February morning in the Fens, it is not hard to spot the beauty of East Anglia’s enormous skies lightened by the winter sun, and of the Marsh Harriers soaring then swooping. Nor in a maternity ward is it difficult to enjoy the palpable delight of new parents as they nurse the miracle in which they and God have just collaborated. Pilgrims, like others, can so often find themselves stirred to ‘wonder, love and praise’ in the midst of daily life.

At the same time, there is also the woeful – so much to concern us. And perhaps, living as pilgrims is amongst the mindsets that can alert us to the cost of our contemporary lifestyle. For example, we are **ecologically reckless**, and pay the price, including climate change, which might make *us* chunner about hotter summers, but threatens to rob Pacific Islanders of their home. We are **economically unfair**, which means some are enjoying unparalleled material wealth whilst others, even in our own neighbourhoods, are not sure where the next meal will come from. And we are party to **ecumenical disintegration**, as politics becomes more irritable and our communities increasingly fragmented. And into that ecological recklessness, economical unfairness and ecumenical disintegration we feel ourselves roused, inspired - or is that called? – to live as pilgrims. Through their current emphases, ‘*Our Calling*’¹ and ‘*Walking the Way: living the life of Jesus today*’,² the Methodist and United Reformed Churches strive to offer us courage, confidence and competence for living as pilgrims. And what do today’s readings offer by way of a theological undergirding for that?

Demonstrably, these readings are all about there being a choice for us. Each in their own way, our three writers suggest we can choose that which is life-giving, or that which is death-dealing. Put as starkly as that, there is, surely, not much to debate. *Any* people of goodwill, religious or not, are going to want to nurture a society that improves people’s lot. The psalm, though, depicts all of this as an unequivocal choice between good and evil; there are righteous people and wicked people. And in both the Jeremiah and Luke readings there are similar threads.

Regarded superficially, do we really favour this blunt ‘righteous’ and ‘wicked’ language today? Maybe not, but let’s look at it more carefully. We don’t need to hear the Psalmist speak of the *self-righteous*. In verse one we hear of what the righteous *don’t* do: they don’t seek counsel from the wicked, they don’t walk in the paths of sinners and they don’t keep company with the scornful, with

¹ see <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/our-calling/>

² see <https://urc.org.uk/our-work/walking-the-way.html>

those whose contempt for others is a ‘particularly powerful killer of relationships’.³ No, for this poet, to be righteous is to be humble, to include God in your world view and to bear the fruit of good works that improve the lot of others. Our writer goes on: ‘It is not so with the wicked’ – they’re characterised as arrogant and self-promoting, covetous and proud. The Psalmist dismisses them as ‘chaff’ – dried up leaves as Fred Anderson puts it⁴ - so light weight that they are blown away, just as the wind separates farmers’ wheat from their waste.

As we resolve to live as pilgrims, does this choice between being fruitfully righteous and uselessly wicked speak to us? Does it speak of our experience? I suppose for me, being able to choose righteousness is impressive, it’s admirable, and it’s utterly necessary for the good ordering of society ... but it is not always within our grasp. Life just isn’t that binary! Hard and fast distinctions between what is a good life and what is not are rare. Life is ambiguous. Temptation is real. With St Paul, ‘I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want us what I do.’⁵ Moreover, so often the choices we face are truly difficult. For example, even though we are profoundly exercised by climate change, we fly in aeroplanes to see our trans-Atlantic grandchildren or for some February sun. We want to protect the environment, but we use plastic this and non-biodegradable that. On another level, I remember working for the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa in Johannesburg, during the 1980s, some time before the election twenty-five years ago that brought Nelson Mandela to the presidency. Young and idealistic, I believed profoundly in the struggle to rid South Africa of *apartheid* – which I so passionately regarded as a theological heresy and an ethical sin. And yet I knew that as soon as I flew into South African air space, I was not only increasing my carbon footprint but was also caught up in *apartheid’s* unjust inequalities – inequalities that were always to my advantage, simply because of the colour of my skin. To be either righteous or wicked is not always quite so straightforward a choice.

Moreover, as Jeremiah listens for God’s word twenty-five centuries ago, he hears God speak of the cursed who trust in mortals and the blessed who trust in God. Like the Psalmist, he paints a scene of the cursed being shrubs planted in parched places where no relief comes, whereas the blessed are like trees planted by water and ceaselessly bearing fruit. But ultimately, Jeremiah’s God takes quite a cautious view of humanity – without God we are devious and perverse, untrustworthy and unreliable. And this is surely the point for us. Eager to live as pilgrims, trusting solely in our own ideas, our own resolve, we are going to flounder and falter. Our carefulness, our commitment and our courage are just too fragile.

And that is why the choice we face is less *to be righteous* than *to walk the way of the Lord*. We cannot be righteous apart from God. Our non-binary nature just gets in the way. But erecting our pilgrim lives upon the foundation of following Christ is a far more promising prospect. And when all else is said and done, that is why I go to church. I think I can probably pray to God, as God is in Jesus, without going to church – I can do it on Helvellyn, in my garden, or in a fireside armchair; maybe even in the shower. But I cannot so easily grow in discipleship, I cannot find the encouragement and example of other companions on the way, and nor can I so obviously take my place in the household of faith without coming to church. Here, as the Word is explored, Jesus pushes out the boundaries of my thinking and radicalises my views with his breath-taking

³ Woodhouse, Patrick 2015 *Life in the Psalms: contemporary meaning in ancient texts* London: Bloomsbury: pages 87ff

⁴ Anderson, Fred R. 2016 *Singing God’s Psalms: metrical psalms and reflections for each Sunday in the church year* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Psalm 1

⁵ Romans 7.19

expression of unconditional love and uncompromising loathing of evil; here as the sacraments are celebrated, the simplest visible signs of God's extraordinary but invisible grace; and here, as your life and mine rub along together, I am enabled and encouraged to make those choices that mould me into a fruitful tree beside life-giving water, rather than a shrub in barren saltlands. I'd rather not use righteous and wicked language, but if we must, I know very well that I cannot be what God asks of me if I turn my back on God. Fired by God's zeal for justice and reliably resurrected love, we can live as pilgrims, ecologically, economically and ecumenically striving for the fullest benefits of God's reign, of God's kin-dom. Whatever The Church at Carrs Lane is, and whatever the Methodist and United Reformed Churches offer through *Our Calling* and *Walking the Way*, they are only as worthwhile as the degree to which they help us live as pilgrims for the building up of the church, for the healing of the world and for the glory of God.

And, as Mr Wesley has it, the best of all is this: doing and bearing God's will, as the Holy Spirits equips us, we are promised the joy of heaven – that in this life God is with us, and beyond it, we shall be with God.

May it be so, and to God alone be the glory.

Amen

N. P. Uden
17th February 2019