

Readings and Sermons for 3rd Sun Before Lent

5th Feb 2012

Readings

Jer 26:1-16

At the beginning of the reign of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, this word came from the Lord: Thus says the Lord: Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the Lord; speak to them all the words that I command you; do not hold back a word. It may be that they will listen, all of them, and will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil doings. You shall say to them: Thus says the Lord: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, and to heed the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently—though you have not heeded—then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth.

The priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of the Lord. And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, 'You shall die! Why have you prophesied in the name of the Lord, saying, "This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant"?' And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the Lord.

When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king's house to the house of the Lord and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of the Lord. Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, 'This man deserves the sentence of death because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears.'

Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, 'It is the Lord who sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you. But as for me, here I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will be bringing innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth the Lord sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears.'

Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, 'This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God.'

Acts 3:1-10

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple.

When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.' And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.

Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Have you ever met someone really famous?

Or more likely been in the presence of someone 'great'? I have, two that come to my mind.

I once met a person called James Blade. As a ten year old he was a regular on Blue Peter so of course he had to be famous. His skill was as a percussionist and to place him, in his day he collaborated with Benjamin Britton

His most famous and widely heard performances were the sound of the African drum playing "V-for-Victory" in Morse code, the introduction to the BBC broadcasts made to the European Resistance during World War II; and providing the sound of the gong seen at the start of films produced by the Rank Organisation. (He created the sound and the man on the gong mimed.)

Well, as a ten year old I went to an evening with James Blade at Welbeck Abbey – the seat of the Dukes of Portland, just over the hill from Creswell, where I grew up.

My memory of the evening is a bit of a blur, I recall different drums & percussion instruments which James Blade talked about and played. I even went up and helped with some drums, him holding my hands and I seemingly thrashing some recognised piece like some demented puppet.

From that day I remember wanting to be a percussionist. Unfortunately my father worked regular nights at the pit and my suggested future was quickly snuffed out.

In 1987 I had been to Taize, a 'monastery', for the want of a better word, a place where 20,000 young people a week, in those days, gathered from all over the world (though mainly Europe) to spend time in worship and conversation and to be in close proximity to Brother Roger and the rest of the brothers from Taize.

The following New Year there was the usual 'European Meeting' in a capital city of Europe and in 1987/8 it took place in Rome. So, soon after Christmas day, I travelled to Rome with around 100,000 people, to be lodged in church and to meet, pray and study in various communities and Basilicas around the city.

At the end of the week we gathered in St. Peter's in the Vatican for a service during which Pope John Paul did a walking audience. He walked right by me – I was on the front of the barricade, though I let a Roman Catholic teacher from Southampton in front of me as he passed....John Paul stroked her cheek—it could have been me!

On reflection the whole experience was at the beginning of my journey to ordination. I remember thinking how small the Pope was, how actually holy, how he walked with an air of blessing—and I felt that the experience was moving. I also remember how lonely he looked, he seemed to be physically carrying the weight of his responsibility.

Not that I was looking to be in the office of Pope, but was this what I was being called to be? As a 22 year old it quite un-nerved me. I remember going and sitting on the steps of St. Peter's in Rome and listening to thousands of voices singing the 'Magnificat' – I ask you the 'Magnificat' of all things.

We've heard today about Encounters and in the readings tonight – encounters again. Jeremiah has a prophesy, an uncomfortable prophesy. A prophesy not very promising for the hearers and not well received by them either.

Jeremiah had received his words of encounter and was obligated to speak. The outcome of his words are clear and his expectation of reception is also as clear. Unfortunately Jeremiah's expectations are close to the mark as the hearers of his message are all but ready to destroy him to death.

But the encounter for the 'Cities of Judah' must have been so real. Other prophets and priests are ignored by officials and people as Jeremiah all but condemns himself, but reiterates the encounter is real—God's words for repentance and change are true.

Another encounter—a lame man with Peter and John. A request by his presence at the 'Beautiful Gate' is a recognised request for alms to simply live by. This man is well known and well pitied.

The encounter with Peter and John—and therefore Jesus – is another life changing encounter with God. What the Apostles give is not the physical alms to sustain this man—but the healing name of Jesus. He stands—in other words reacts—but his response is even more exaggerated, he leaps up, dances, rejoices and praises God. Response to encounter indeed!

Now I'm not expecting you to jump up and dance. But just like an encounter with someone awesome or famous makes its mark, I hope that we can begin to look for encounter with God. Not necessarily like hearing a word from Jeremiah or a meeting with an Apostle. But looking out for an encounter with God which quickens our senses to be holy and responsible for God's sake. Encounters that speak of his presence in situations, in others and in moments when we may learn and sense that presence.

Encounters are there to be sought, recognised and dwelt upon. Encounters that may drive a response in our day to day lives.