

## St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> June 2020

*Matthew 10: 40 – 42; Jeremiah 28: 5 - 9*

Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. Whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous. Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple, none of these will lose their reward.<sup>1</sup> These are the final words Jesus said to his disciples before he sent them into Galilee to proclaim good news and to heal.

They were to be prophets of the future, righteous men. If people listened to them as prophets, trusted what they had to say as righteous men, and offered them hospitality then the people of Galilee would receive their reward.

600 years before, further south in the Israelite kingdom of Judea, these words would have resonated. Back then, in the court of King Zedekiah, the prophet Jeremiah was rejected as a prophet, distrusted as a righteous man, and rather than receiving hospitality, he was thrown out of the king's presence, and the temple.

This morning, we read some of the words Jeremiah spoke at that time. He prophesied that King Zedekiah should submit Judea to the yoke of the imperial Babylonians. God willed it; rebellion would be disastrous. But, that was not what the king wanted to hear. His people wanted to break free from the yoke of Babylon, they wanted to be released from their occupation, and the king was keen to give them what they wanted to stay popular and in power.

While Jeremiah was telling the king not to listen to the people, and that he should submit his nation to Babylon so that in the long run everything would work out, another prophet pitched up, Hananiah. Hananiah was more than willing to tell the king what the king wanted to hear.

Hananiah prophesied, 'Rebel! Rebel! Babylon's power is broken. Let's throw off the yoke of our captivity; we can grasp peace and freedom.' When forced to choose between them, the king did not welcome Jeremiah as a prophet, and so didn't get a prophet's reward. Instead, the king welcomed Hananiah as a righteous man. But, Hananiah was a fraud, and the nation received no righteous person's reward. The result was a disaster for Judea; slaughter and exile. If only the king had recognised Jeremiah as a prophet and as a righteous man, then Judea would have been saved.

The importance of discerning who are prophets and righteous people, from those who are frauds or just plain wrong, doesn't just confront kings in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, or a messiah in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it is something that confronts us today. Today, fraudsters prowl the internet, for example; watch out for them they are trying to steal your money. The ability to predict the future accurately, even in the short term, is important for Governments right now as they try to work out which scientific prophets they should listen to, in order to judge when best to release us from our occupation by Covid-19.

Whether it is the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, the first century, or the 21<sup>st</sup> century the same advice applies when it comes to who to listen to; be suspicious of those who are telling you what you want to hear. That is what caught King Zedekiah out. Hananiah was telling him what he wanted to hear, Jeremiah was not; so, the king chose to listen to Hananiah, and that was a mistake.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 10: 41

Fraudsters do that kind of thing all the time; they pray on our weaknesses: our greed (easy ways to make easy money), our egos (easy ways to feel important), our fears for the future (easy ways to avoid disaster), our guilt (easy ways to feel better about our prosperity and less guilty about poverty).

The best way to avoid fraud, to avoid falling in to the trap of hearing only what you want to hear, is to know yourself. What are your weaknesses: when are you greedy; fearful; or puffed-up? Fraudsters will find out and use these against you. If you want to know what the future holds for you, be aware of what your hopes and fears are, and don't just listen to those tell you what you want to hear.

Jesus was aware that his disciples might be mistaken for fraudsters praying on people's weaknesses and selling his Gospel cheaply for their own benefit. So, he taught them that the rewards of their preaching wouldn't go to them, but to those who heard it. They wouldn't even receive the credit for the message they were proclaiming; the message was God's, not theirs, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me," he told them.

Today, there are many messages that we are invited to listen to; many prophecies of the immediate future. Whereas for much of the past three months the Government's message has been simple, 'Stay at home', now it is more nuanced.

To take one example, just this week the Government changed its message about schools. Seven days ago, the message was that schools wouldn't return to normal within the coming year. This week, all being well, the message is that they will back to normal by August. To assess which of these conflicting prophecies we should heed, requires an understanding of who they are meant to benefit – parents, the teaching unions, the Government or children themselves. Our assessment also depends on what we ourselves to hear; what are our weaknesses?

For many Scottish children these past three months have been very difficult. They have been unable to see people their own age. They have been cut off from the routine, and in some cases the security, of school. In the future those who struggle academically will likely struggle more; equalities may increase.

While that message is most likely all true, it is not the only message that is being proclaimed to us today. Amidst the isolation and the difficulties that the lockdown has caused everyone. Amid the illness and even the deaths that the virus has brought, there is nevertheless a message of hope.

As we emerge back in to the world, and ponder what are the right things to do, where the right places to go are, and who the right people to meet are, there will be things that we take with us from our experience of the last three months that will help us to shape our world, our society and our lives for the better. There will be things that will shape our church for the better. Indeed, as we work out how St. Ninian's will emerge from this lockdown period, the Church of Scotland centrally is encouraging Kirk Sessions to reflect on their congregation's experiences, and ask questions about the future of buildings, and innovations.

The message that is being proclaimed to us this Sunday in this service, the cup of refreshing cold water that we are being offered, comes to us without any strings attached. I invite you to listen to the voices of our young people again, and to hear from them a prophecy of hope. They are prophets of the future, and as much as there are stories of hard times for young people, there are also stories of hope. Their prophetic voices of what they will take with them

into the future are not told for any personal benefit. They don't seek to pull the wool over anyone's eyes. They come to us from the spiritual place of hope not because they seek credit.

So, hear again; and receive a prophet's reward, the reward of the righteous, and a cup of cool water of hope.