

Sermon at Christ Church, Morningside, 20th September 2015

Readings: Jeremiah 11:18-20
Psalm 54
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a
Mark 9:30-37

There is quite a lot of conflict in our readings today.

In the Old Testament reading, from Jeremiah, it is between Jeremiah, as God's prophet, the bearer of bad news, and his own people: "I was like a lamb led to the slaughter ... It was against me that they schemed ... saying 'Let us cut him off from the land of the living'", a death threat, in other words, leading to the reply "But you Lord judge righteously, so let me see your retribution on them ..."

In the Psalm, Psalm 54, the words are part of the conflict between David and Saul. David is in hiding because Saul is jealous of him after his success against Goliath, with the result that they have had what in modern parlance would be described as 'a spectacular bust-up'. Saul is trying to kill David, but his attempts have been foiled, so in this Psalm David says "The insolent have risen against me and seek my life", another death threat, in other words, so "Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me."

Also, in the Gospel reading, Jesus, firstly, speaks of his own betrayal and death at the hands of the religious authorities of the day; and then, secondly, he has to deal with a dispute among his own disciples, as they have been arguing with each other about who is the greatest. His advice, in response to this, is "Whoever wants to be first must be last, and servant of all."

We have here, therefore, examples of conflict *within* communities, between David and Saul, among Jesus' disciples, and between the godly and the ungodly in the time of Jeremiah. And we also have examples of conflict *between* communities, since the issues in the time of Jeremiah also involved Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians; the conflict between David and Saul involved lots of other peoples such as the Philistines, the Amalekites and the Ziphites; and Jesus' betrayal and death involved the Romans as well as the Jewish religious authorities of the day.

Conflict of these two kinds, internal and external, seems to be inevitable, or at least recurrent, and there are plenty of examples of this in the world today too. By way of internal conflicts we have only to think of the problems between Catholic and Protestant Christians, between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, or between Israeli settlers and other Jews, as we were hearing last week from Elspeth Strachan as she told us about her recent experiences in Israel-Palestine. And there are of course extremely vigorous debates going on in Christian circles at

the moment about homosexuality and female religious leadership. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, is working extremely hard to maintain the unity of the Anglican Communion on these points.

With regard to external conflicts there then no shortage of examples of conflict between communities. We have only to think of Israel-Palestine, or the problems between Hindus and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, or the difficulties between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar, to name just three. There are all sorts of conflicts, therefore, around the world.

The key question is thus what to do about this, how to address conflict, of both kinds, internal and external. Here are two suggestions.

Firstly, today's Epistle offers some very good advice on this point, though the Epistle of James has itself sometimes been a cause of conflict, with Martin Luther, the initiator of the Protestant Reformation, arguing that it should be cut out of the New Testament. Why was it there, he asked. The answer is simply that it is, because the compilers of the New Testament, well before the time of Luther, thought that it should be included, so it was, and on a number of very important points with regard to conflict it offers significant and hard-hitting advice, of a very practical nature.

Chapter 1 verse 19, for example, says "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." How different a place the world would be if that advice was more widely-heard. 1:22 says "Be doers of the word, not just hearers." What does that mean? "Religion that is pure and undefiled is to care for orphans and widows and keep oneself unstained by the world" (1:27), a verse which has very obvious contemporary implications with regard to the refugee crisis in Central Europe. "Avoid favouritism and partiality" (2:1 and 2:9). "Faith without works is dead" (2:17). "Not many of you should become teachers, because those who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (3:1), a verse which is very sobering for at least some of us!

As we heard last week, there is then a special focus on the power of the tongue. "The tongue is a fire. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire ... No-one can tame the tongue ..." (3:5-8). The tongue, of course, is the source of the angry words which are the cause of a great number of conflicts. The Epistle of James goes on, though, to address the legacy of this and how to deal with it, in the portion which has been read for us today. "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show that your good works are done with gentleness, born of wisdom. Avoid bitter envy and selfish ambition ... for these things lead to disorder and wickedness of every kind. Seek, therefore, the wisdom from above, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, and has no partiality or hypocrisy. These things lead to a harvest of righteousness and peace" (3:13-18).

The climax of the advice is then "Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil and he will flee. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you" (4:7-8a). Here, therefore, we have excellent *scriptural* advice for the prevention and resolution of conflict, of both kinds, both internal and external. "Seek the wisdom from above."

Secondly, other things may also help, and one such thing may be music, the legacy of "the muse". Music is famously commended by William Shakespeare: "If music be the food of love, play on" (*Twelfth Night*); and "the man that hath no music in himself ... is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils", conflict, in other words (*The Merchant of Venice*). What do many of us do if we want to relax after a long hard day? We put the music on. And in the medical context, music therapy is now widely used.

Joseph Addison, the founding editor of "The Spectator", wrote: "Music, the greatest good that mortals know, and all of heaven here below ... it wakes the soul and lifts it high." Alexander Pope wrote "some to church repair, not for the doctrine but the music there." There is some unlikely modern support too: Aldous Huxley, who was no friend of religion, commented "after silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is music." And John Cage, the contemporary American composer, wrote: "Music is edifying for from time to time it sets the soul in motion." Music may therefore be another means of addressing conflict, and many of us, during the Proms Season over the summer, will have enjoyed the playing of Daniel Barenboim's East-West Divan Orchestra, which aims to help to resolve conflict in the Middle East.

It does not always work, for one of Saul's attempts to kill David in the Old Testament was when David was peacefully playing his harp, or lyre. Saul threw his spear at him twice (1 Samuel 18), as his jealousy developed, but David "eluded him" as it says in the New Revised Standard Version, or as the Good News Bible says, in slightly more contemporary language, he "dodged him". Nothing is therefore 100% reliable as a soothing agent for conflict.

Music can, however, help, and it is partly for that reason that music has a significant role in different religious traditions, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and other. Over the next few months here at Christ Church we will be having a mini-series in our 'Journeys in Faith' seminars after church on this theme, and the series will be launched today by Rabbi Mark Solomon of the Edinburgh Liberal Jewish Congregation, who is renowned for the power and quality of his voice, and will be telling us about music in the Jewish tradition, both in the context of worship, what goes on in the synagogue, and in the wider cultural life of the Jewish community.

Later talks will focus on music in the World of Islam, and then on music in different aspects of the Christian tradition, in both the Reformed/Church of Scotland context, and then in our own Anglican tradition.

Here, therefore, are two helpful vehicles for avoiding, or preventing, and also resolving conflict. First of all, we have the very useful *scriptural* advice from the Epistle of James. "Avoid bitter envy and selfish ambition, and seek the wisdom from above, which is peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruit ... Submit yourselves to God ..."

Secondly, there is *music*, as commended in the Bible too, in the Book of Job, chapter 38, verse 7: "when the morning stars sang together, and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy." *Amen*.

Hugh Goddard