



Sermon: - 16th October 2016

Are your ears itching?

Psalm 119:97-104, 2 Timothy 3:14 – 4:5, Luke 18:1-8

As many of you are aware I have just come back from a family wedding in California. It was great fun and a very special event, as well as being an opportunity to see a part of the world I have never been to before and have some amazing experiences, including a visit to Alcatraz and a close encounter with a giant Redwood tree. But even in the midst of all the celebrations, catching up with family members, getting to know new family members, there was one topic on everyone's minds; the presidential campaign. At one point I was sitting chatting to a friend of the groom when she began to talk about the campaign and her frustration with the popularity of Donald Trump. After a sustained monologue of despair and incomprehension about the way the campaign was going she said "You British must wonder what on earth we are thinking, I tell you; we are thinking 'what are we thinking!'"

A few days later I was watching a news programme. It was in the wake of yet another emerging scandal surrounding Donald Trump. The presenter pointed out that even one of the controversial incidents that have arisen throughout his campaign would have stopped any other candidate in his or her tracks, yet Donald Trump continues to rise above it all. They are calling him Teflon man! Despite scandal after scandal regarding his opinions and past actions he enjoys the support of almost 50% of the American public. Many people in the USA and even more in our country might wonder "How can this be?" And it is not simply about one person or one policy position or one country or one political position. Throughout the western world, it seems, politicians and parties of both left and right who embrace populist policies, who give voice to the more selfish desires we all harbour, are in the ascendency.

The attitudes displayed by many current politicians and aspiring national leaders have made it acceptable to be racist, sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, anti Semitic and much more besides. These politicians can get away with extolling the supposed 'virtues' of tax avoidance or unguarded language or misogyny or racial superiority and so on and on... They make the pursuit of goals of self-interest, and indeed selfishness respectable. They say what many people think and feel in the darker recesses of their hearts, they are not afraid to be politically incorrect, and it seems that people love them for it. Have we made no progress in the last 100 years in terms of equality and social justice? What is going on?

Well perhaps Paul's letter to Timothy has a clue. We read in Ch 4: 3 "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, will accumulate teachers to suit their own desires."

In the case of the USA I wonder if many Americans are in danger of departing from sound doctrine and following a teacher to suit their own desires. I also wonder to what extent we are also in danger of doing this? This current trend towards populism in politics means that policies are often designed to appease the public rather than to address the issues. But surely our leaders are there to lead, not to follow every whim of public opinion.

Paul tells us how this will pan out; when we depart from sound doctrine, anything goes. We become less concerned with whether or not something is true, we just want it to be comfortable. As Christians we may think that we can avoid that sort of temptation. That we seek after sound doctrine, that we believe one message, the gospel message, and are immune to the seductions of the sound-bite. But I wonder how seriously we take the gospel, in fact, especially the hard parts. Isn't there a part of all of us that wants life to be easy? Part of us that is tempted by the promise of a more comfortable, more prosperous life, regardless of the effect on others who are less fortunate? The gospel message can make for uncomfortable reading. Perhaps we are tempted to respond by saying, "Don't challenge us too much!" Perhaps we are tempted to look for the bits that make us feel good, thinking we can just ignore the rest, or even discard it. After all, religion is a personal thing, and if it helps me then that's all that matters, isn't it ...? Or is it ...?

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said; "it is time in the West to defend not so much human rights as human obligations". Defending human rights all too easily descends into – it's all about me. My rights are the ones that matter. If we concentrate on our obligations, it's more about others. Christianity is big on obligations – helping the weak, the disadvantaged, the poor. But that is an unpopular message.

There was an article in the Times some time ago about WH Smith the booksellers. They introduced a new section into their stores called Personal Development. It was a commercial decision. The buyer for the company said, "Anything in the spiritual or meditation line sells." There is a spiritual void in people's lives that they are trying to fill, but they are not trying to fill it with Christianity or any other religion. These books are about near death experiences and angelic encounters. The writer of the article in the Times commented that the faith demanded of the readers of these books is undemanding and non-committed. These books do not ask the effort that Christianity does. Neither, she wrote, do they have a dark side, Satan and the

wages of sin go unmentioned. Welcome to the saccharine universe of New Age theology. And when we depart from sound doctrine, we will follow anyone who makes promises that we want to hear, whether that is a politician, or a preacher.

Paul also tells us that scripture is useful for reproof, for teaching and for correction. Which of us wants to be reproved? But sometimes perhaps we need it, and when we choose teaching that is going to suit our own desires, we do not get reproof! And in following our own desires we are in danger of ignoring the scriptures that tell us to look after the poor and the disadvantaged. When self-interest becomes the driving force, the weak are sent to the wall.

We need sound doctrine. We need to be protected from our base desires, from the selfishness that lies at the centre of every human heart – none of us are immune to it. The value of the word of God is revealed to us by the Psalmist: I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path. In following the word of God, in seeking out sound doctrine, there lies wisdom.

Towards the end of the Second World War, American troops captured the island of Okinawa. It was in a state of moral and social collapse... They were appalled by the disintegration of society they found as they gradually advanced through the island. Then they came to the village of Shimbakuku. They were greeted by two men, one of them carrying a bible. The G.I.'s suspected a trap, and entered the village cautiously, but to their amazement they found everything neat and tidy, the fields tilled and fertile, and the whole village a model of order and hygiene, in total contrast to the squalor and chaos they had found in the rest of the island. One of the old men who had welcomed them explained why.

Thirty years earlier, an American missionary had stopped off at their village on the way to Japan. He didn't stay long and just two people became Christians - the two old men. The missionary taught them a few hymns and prayers, and left them a Japanese translation of the bible, urging them to model their lives on it. The two men had no other Christian teaching or fellowship, but by basing their lives on what they read in the bible they transformed their community. When the American soldiers arrived they found no jail, no brothel, no drunkenness. Shimbakuku was an oasis of love and purity in a swamp of degradation and despair. This is the truth of Scripture, put to the test. Christianity works.

Sadly, our culture, our society seems determined to abandon the Christian principles on which it was founded and seek after personal gain and self-interest. The gap between Church and State grows ever larger. In the face of this, what should we do? Do we simply retreat into our own communities and pursue our own interests? Is that the Christian thing to do? Or is

there an alternative? Perhaps the story of the island Shimbakuku tells us that there is an alternative. The more we put our Christian principles into practice, the more we are likely to infect our society in a positive way. We can seek truth and not self-interest; base our lives on biblical principles not selfish aspirations. And the very least we can do is pray. I say the very least, but perhaps that is the most that we can do. Pray for our nation, pray for our politicians, pray for America as they go to the polls. Pray that God's will is done and Christian principles are upheld. Pray, and pray, and pray, and when it seems as if there is no answer, pray some more. As the widow discovered when she persevered with the judge – if you keep asking, eventually you will get an answer. Are our ears itching? Do we want to hear a message of comfort that only serves our own interests? Or are we prepared to embrace the hard truths of the gospel, seek after sound doctrine, stand up for biblical principles, and pray that God's kingdom will come on earth.