

# Do not judge or compare ...

*... rather, be grateful and gracious*

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*A sermon given on the Seventeenth Sunday of Trinity, 22nd September 2024, by the Mission Priest, the Revd Eileen Connolly, in Beverley Minster*

*Jeremiah 11:18-20; Mark 9:30-37*

Prophets generally have a hard time. If I say the word prophet to you, who do you think of? What sort of people? Do you think of the religious prophets from the Old Testament, like Elijah or Ezekiel, or like today in our first reading, Jeremiah? Prophets in the Bible had an intimate relationship with the Lord God, and they received messages from God to give to the people of Israel. Usually they were to repent, change your ways, and get back to living as God intended.

But I was thinking, what about modern day prophets? Who are the prophets in contemporary society over the last few years? Perhaps you think about environmental activists like Greta Thunberg, or perhaps you think of David Attenborough. What about social justice visionaries like Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, or cultural artistic ones like Bob Dylan or John Lennon. Maybe you think of tech visionaries like Elon Musk. But what about Christian voices today? Who would you say are the modern day prophets of today? The Pope, perhaps. Maybe the Archbishops.

But prophets usually have a hard time.

And Jeremiah, in our reading today, was called the Weeping Prophet. And I'll leave you to imagine why that was the case. The message he was speaking wasn't often received well by the people of Judah and Israel. He challenged them in the way that they were living and he spoke about how God would punish them if they continued to be unfaithful to him. And today in our first reading, we hear of his anguish at realising that his own people were planning to kill him.

Now fast forward to the reading from the gospel in Mark where Jesus is talking about how he is going to be tried and rejected and killed. I sometimes wonder if Jesus got really fed up with these men that he had chosen to be his disciples and to carry on his work after he had gone because they weren't really clever, were they? They had been rejected by the rabbis of their time and not been good enough to enter into that rabbinic apprenticeship, yet Jesus had chosen them: one of them was hot-headed and impulsive; another was a cheat and a liar; if you watch the film 'Chosen', Matthew is portrayed as neuro-divergent. You can imagine this group of people - some were relatives, brothers - I think most of them would have found it hard to be thrown together and told to get on - perhaps they were just a bit slow.

But I think what Jesus was saying was a bit hard to understand, and he was trying to prepare them for what lay ahead. Imagine what he was thinking - *'Things might seem rosy and exciting now, but soon everything will be different. At the moment, you might be basking in the adulation of being with someone like me who can heal, raise people from the dead. You might even be enjoying some of the glory, but soon people will be baying for your blood. Our names will be a curse. Don't be ignorant. Please listen to me and be prepared so that when the time comes,*

*you'll have more of a chance to keep your faith and your nerve. And maybe, just maybe, you can be more of a support to me when it happens.'*

But the Bible says they did not understand what he was saying and they were afraid to ask him. Don't you think that sometimes when we hear something we don't want to hear, we stay silent? But that wasn't the only time they were silent in this passage. It reads, *Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?'* And this is where they went silent again, because they had been arguing - Jesus had been talking really seriously about what was going to happen but they just didn't seem to understand and on the way back to Capernaum they were arguing about who was the greatest! It's so easy for us to hear and judge them. But it does seem scandalous - had they no sensitivity to what Jesus was asking and talking to them about? But just before this time, Jesus had sent them out in twos and given them authority to heal the sick, cast out demons, and proclaim the message. Now, if Jesus had given me that authority and I'd seen people healed, and the blind see, and the deaf hear, I think I'd have been buzzing a bit and so when they got together they were probably saying, 'Well, how many did you heal? I raised somebody from the dead. What did you do? I cast two demons out of two people. What did you do?' - so maybe they were just talking about that.

I heard a phrase recently and it's one that's attributed to Theodore Roosevelt - 'Comparison is the thief of joy.' But we all do it - the advertising world depends on us comparing ourselves with others and feeling lacking so that we can do whatever it takes to make us feel that we fit. But even when you're a little child and you go to school, it's indoctrinated in us that we compare and contrast and that we're in a competitive society. At my primary school, St Peter and Paul's in Bolton, they used to grade us at the end of year report and you got given a place, so out of 32 children in your class you might be number one or you might be number 32. Then Sister Imelda would come in on the day the reports were being given and she would line us up in order. Who was the first? - and they were given presents; who were the ones who were 32? - so we were brought up with this. And these days we compare league tables for schools. But we also compare and contrast personally - we look at how successful we are? How many friends do I have on Facebook? What job am I doing? How are my children performing? Where am I living? How young do I look compared to the peers that I went to school with? And social media feeds us with this need to compare.

But when I compare myself I have to judge you. I have to judge something about you so that I can find where my place is - sometimes I might think, 'Oh yes, I'm a bit above you' so my self-esteem might be given a boost; but then other times I might think, 'Oh no, you're better than me in that area' so I might feel a bit down-hearted. So you see, comparison really is the thief of joy because it stops you from living your life grateful for who God made you and the situation you're in and the people you have and the gifts and the talents you have.

What does Jesus do when he senses that the disciples were comparing and deciding who was better than another. This is a crucial lesson that we all need to learn because the ways of God's Kingdom are so different to the ways of the world - they are the exact opposite. Leaders who lead within the Kingdom of God have to do so in a way that's radically different. So Jesus brings a child. Now in those days children had no value whatsoever until they had grown up and were able to contribute (in some translations, the word for child in the Greek is the same one as servant or slave). So he brings a child and he puts it in the middle and he says these words, *"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me*

*welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*" So he is saying to the future leaders of his church and to us today that the people that you judge as having no value - the ones you compare yourself to and feel better than - they are the ones who I associate with - they are the ones who have the most value, and they are the ones who I am with - and you will be judged by your loyalty and devotion to such people and the welcome that you give to them.

Now, let's think of this word welcome - we have 'welcomers' in the Minster and it could be that you think of welcomers as just being polite and saying hello to people. But the welcome Jesus describes goes far beyond mere politeness. He's saying that the church will give respect, dignity, hospitality, and honour to those who do not receive the same in our society. It's a lesson in leadership we all need to learn - *"whoever wants to be the first must be the servant of all"* because that is what Jesus was. You might sit here and think, 'I'm not a leader. I don't lead anything. I don't have any role or position or power.' But we're all leaders - in our families, in our neighbourhoods; we can influence and lead others.

Let me ask, how are we doing at Servant Leadership in this church? How are we welcoming those whom society does not value in this church? I mean really welcoming - wanting them here and not just accommodating them because it's a public building. What about children? How welcome are children? What if they came and made loads of mess and noise? How patient would we be? How welcoming then? What if they demanded that we change things slightly?

And let's get more personal. How are we personally in the realm of comparing ourselves to others? Because Jesus really wants to set us free. These are the things that trap us, and these are the things that trap me - that envy, that comparison that comes along with that way of perceiving people and life.

Do we need to learn to accept ourselves and the situation that we're in as a person who is loved by God, created by God, valued by God? Do we need to accept that the position that we're in is the position that God intends us to be in, and in that place, to find Him? Instead of feeling inadequate because we're not as good as somebody else or we're not as gifted in certain areas, do we need to look more closely at the gifts and talents that God has given to us? And do we need to offer and use those to serve others?

So today, maybe God is asking us to put away judgement and comparison and accept with gratitude who God has made us to be. Maybe we should ask Him what to do with however long we have left on this Earth to serve him in this place.

I'd like us now to take a moment and for us to respond to God in whatever way.

Thank you, Lord, for your word.

# Reading Texts

## Jeremiah 11:18-20

<sup>18</sup> *It was the Lord who made it known to me, and I knew;*

*then you showed me their evil deeds.*

<sup>19</sup> *But I was like a gentle lamb*

*led to the slaughter.*

*And I did not know it was against me*

*that they devised schemes, saying,*

*'Let us destroy the tree with its fruit,*

*let us cut him off from the land of the living,*

*so that his name will no longer be remembered!'*

<sup>20</sup> *But you, O Lord of hosts, who judge righteously,*

*who try the heart and the mind,*

*let me see your retribution upon them,*

*for to you I have committed my cause.*

## Mark 9.30-37

<sup>30</sup> *They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; <sup>31</sup> for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.'* <sup>32</sup> *But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. <sup>33</sup> Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?'* <sup>34</sup> *But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'* <sup>36</sup> *Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, <sup>37</sup> 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'*