SERVICE OF COMMISSIONING OF STUDENT READERS IN CITI 02.10.19

Readings: Jeremiah 32.1-3a, 6-15; psalm 91.1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6.6-19; St Luke 16.19-31

Jeremiah 32.15: *For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.*

The Old Testament and Gospel Readings this evening talk about acquisition of property in two entirely different ways. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of his fresh purchase exuberantly. The very safekeeping of the documents – some sealed and some open – is a delight to him as it nails down the legality of what he is doing. The rich man – known to us in an earlier version of The Bible as Dives – speaks of his wealth and of his excess in panic mode. As we listen to his voice, we discern that he would do absolutely anything to have divested himself of such wealth ahead of his current predicament – or would he? Is not the predicament itself the very place where Jesus wants to hold and to test our understanding and our commitment, our grasp and our gut?

The two Readings also teach us something about time itself. Time ticks on in what we think of as the background. In fact time is very much in the foreground and events give it focus. Often something has to happen for us to spot and to recognize time as a dynamic force because, irrespective of what we do with it, time happens and time passes. For Jeremiah, this time is the time of the Jerusalem siege. The economy was not moving. Jeremiah was not moving because he was effectively under house arrest. He did all that any prophet could do: he talked about it! But he did so in a way that we rightly call: prophetic. By this I mean that his action spoke into a situation that was imprisoned in hopelessness and siege; siege brings more than claustrophobia. It brings loss of identity. It brings the need for structure and system. It brings the type of public and personal lethargy that calls for big gestures if morale is to be regained and restored. Jeremiah buys a field. Jeremiah points to a new future of stability and of shared civic life. His single field points to plural houses, fields and vineyards. The prophet offers a vision of time: hope from the future in the present, all within the providence of God.

The rich man is affected by time differently. He is imprisoned by the past in the future. In that stark, spatial imagery of Heaven and Hades, his possessions are not able to barter the route between them. The words of Abraham have passed into legend: *between you and me there is a great gulf fixed …* It doesn’t get much starker than that. The comparison of the long-term fate of Dives and Lazarus suggests that the time for bartering is long gone. Lazarus was both irrelevant and invisible to Dives in life as we know it. The relationship just was not there and the communication now is not possible. Giving up on his own plight, Dives moves to bargaining on behalf of five brothers. But Abraham The Patriarch can only point out the obvious: if they cannot listen to Moses and The Prophets – the living tradition of the Jewish people – they are not going to be convinced *even if someone rises from the dead.* We cannot but feel the pinch of this logic if our own Christian faith is based on the resurrection alone rather than on grappling with all the engagement with the tainted that came before it and all the community building that came after it.

As you embark on a lifetime of ordained ministry, time itself is of the essence. It is in part the fact that you, like me, have no option but to give an account of your time to God and to your neighbour. It is the fact that that you are at a time of transition in self-understanding and in spiritual responsibility. It is also a time where it is useful to look out for Scriptural echoes in who you are and in what we do. It would seem to me that in what St Luke has Jesus say to The Pharisees, he is using a cautionary tale that was well embedded in the secular as well as in the religious tradition. I would encourage you not to be frightened of the secular and not to blame the secular for what are in fact internal ecclesiastical failures. It is a well-honed maxim in The Civil Service: Be wary of imputing to conspiracy what can just as easily be explained by incompetence. Not all of the secular world is against us all of the time; and many of us enjoy living in a secular society and being its beneficiaries. I hear echoes of The Song of Mary, Magnificat, in this parable. I hear echoes of Philippians 2, The Song of Christ’s Self-emptying. I hear echoes of St Matthew 25 where we are presented with a judgement on ourselves, and one that we can work out for ourselves, by which I mean the relevance and the irrelevance of other people, whom we both see and do not see, all of whom are equal in the sight of God. And of course I also hear the echo of the parable of the Good Samaritan in St Luke 10 and the haunting question of the bright young entrepreneur: Who, then, is my neighbour? The prophecy is fulfilled in our own hearing.

You also embark on a lifetime of ordained ministry at a time when the Church of Ireland is marking one hundred and fifty years of Disestablished life. The situation of *de facto* superiority of the Church of England and Ireland in an Ireland where numerically it was no more than 12% of the population at its height and where it had control of civic and religious life was unsustainable and unrealistic. It is hardly any wonder that the Church of Ireland historiographer, Dr Kenneth Milne, has written an article recently entitled: Disestablishment – in the nick of time. It is an irony that other Christian traditions in Ireland have had more interest in our Disestablishment than have we. It is fair to say that, combined with other events (and it is events that force the recognition of time passing), Disestablishment has reduced the capacity of the Church of Ireland to speak effectively into public life in Ireland and has turned us inward rather than outward. This is not simply my opinion; it is also the opinion of the archbishop of Armagh. I suggest that the psychological deficit runs something like this: because we once were somebody, however incredible that being somebody in fact was, we think we ought somehow to be somebody now by virtue simply of being Church of Ireland. Beware of phrases like: punching above our weight. They expose us to the sort of ridicule that comes from thinking you are entitled to be special when in fact other people don’t know what you are talking about. There is no need for a minority – which is what the Church of Ireland is in both political jurisdictions – to be abject in hope or lacking in confidence.

Free to shape our future: this is the theme that The Church of Ireland has adopted for this year of Disestablishment 150. Let us hope and pray that the spirit of Jeremiah sweeps through the year and through the church. Let us hope also that you will be equipped to make your contribution and to give of your best in this time of commemoration and hope. Let us take hold of the exhortation with which 1 Timothy 6.19 leaves us when speaking of the rich, that is us: *They (we) are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves (ourselves) the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they (we) may take hold of the life that really is life.*