

This has been an extraordinary year for the UK. Most of us would acknowledge that for a lot of the time we haven't had a clue about what has been going on. More worryingly, we probably also feel that the people whose role it is to know what is going on – or even to make things happen – haven't had a clue either. This isn't helped by increasing distrust of the organisations and organs which purport to tell us what is going on, and the increasingly irresponsible behaviour of some of them. We've always known that sources of news and opinions will have particular perspectives. You don't have to spend long, for example, reading our newspapers to get a clear impression of their political leanings. But we now have a very large number of deliverers of so-called facts and information, and many more ways in which what we see and hear can be manipulated and distorted. We have to make choices, and it is temptingly easy to stay within a comfortable bubble of opinion which agrees with and reinforces our own existing viewpoint (and, of course, our own prejudices). There is truth out there, but it becomes ever more elusive.

Which is perhaps why, when considering the readings for today, I was struck by three things (no – not 'Education, education, education'). The first is at the start of the reading from Jeremiah:

'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock....and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord.'

It would be hard to generate a more ringing condemnation of our own leaders, and I don't think it matters what sort of leader we are talking about. It's difficult to see anyone actively working in public to bring people together, encourage co-operation and mutual respect, and begin to reduce and repair the fractures in our society. Admittedly being in the throes of an election doesn't do much to foster peace and harmony. But there are so many non-political examples as well. One of the latest is the decision of Churches Together in England not to accept the newly-selected president of one of its six sections because the person is in a same-sex marriage. What makes this even more of an outrage is that the woman concerned is a Quaker – surely the representative of a supremely peaceful, principled organisation which is dedicated to reconciliation and inclusivity. 'Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture', says the Lord.

The second thing that struck me was the psalm. Admittedly this may also have had something to do with the readings for daily evening prayer. We are currently working through the books of Daniel and Revelation, both of which are thoroughly apocalyptic and full of terrible happenings and awful portents. Neither provides any immediate hope, although both Daniel and John (who wrote Revelation) were desperate for this. What is there to hang on to?

'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble....the nations make much ado and the kingdoms are shaken....the Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.'

One of the common features of both books is their emphasis on the sheer length of time for which confusion and chaos will continue without respite – a salutary warning to our present-day society which expects an instant solution for every problem. But 'God is our refuge and strength...therefore we will not fear.' All we must do is to step aside from the clamour and

turmoil: 'Be still and know that I am God.' But this is not a gentle God, but a God who 'breaks the bow and shatters the spear, and burns the shields with fire'.

People whose main plank of belief is in the gentle Jesus of hymns, Bible stories and miracles can find it hard to reconcile this with the active, militant, sometimes ferocious God of the Old Testament and particularly the Psalms. Jesus came to bring a new covenant, so it is tempting to skip over the difficult and apparently irrelevant old stuff and concentrate on the Gospels and Epistles. But this presents a very one-dimensional view of our faith. Jesus himself was raised in the Jewish tradition, knew the scriptures well, quoted them frequently, and demonstrated in word and action how they were to be correctly interpreted and understood. We have to share the insight of the criminal who, dying in shared agony with Jesus, was able to recognise at that excruciating moment that Jesus was truly the king. 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' While the bystanders watched and jeered, and goaded Jesus for proof of a kingship that they could not possibly understand, this man saw the truth. Jesus's response to him was that of a ruler with power over life and death, who can grant mercy and redemption or withhold it. Which is the third striking thought: that Pilate with his inscription, and the criminal with his request, were able to recognise the kingship in this abused, suffering man.

As Paul says: 'Christ is the image of the invisible God', and that God is compassionate to those who believe, but also powerful, majestic, inconceivably mighty and utterly, unimaginably holy. The illuminators of medieval books of Psalms often used pictures to prompt the imagination and stimulate the devotion of the people who owned and used the books; people who were often barely literate in Latin (the language of church services and their Bible) but who had learned the words of the Psalms. A favourite image was of Christ in Majesty (which also appears in painted icons). One version shows Christ in flowing robes and magnificent halo, hand raised in blessing, with the world under his feet. But the one I prefer depicts Christ seated on a throne and holding the world in his hand. Which puts us and Christ in our proper places.