

Lord God, you speak to us through scripture by the power of your Holy Spirit. As we hear the words of your Son, help us to listen. Amen.

- This is a cleansing of my soul sermon!
- What use is a cup of cold water when you are used to a 2 litre plastic bottle of Pepsi cola?
- “ *whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.*”
- Who are the little ones and what is a cup of cold water? Probably the most frequent interpretation is that a cup of cold water means what is actually most needed at that moment.
- And the little ones are children, the innocent, the victims, those who are most vulnerable in society.
- However Jesus has just finished a long discussion with his disciples and the crowd about how to cope in the face of persecution – we have been looking at this for the last couple of weeks – and Matthew of course, is reporting this about 30 years or so later to Churches which are well used to being victimized.
- And most of the books about this passage imply that ‘*little ones*’, means other Christians. People like you and me. Perhaps we could broaden that to society in general for the context of this sermon?
- If you accept that, then actually we are asking the question, ‘What are we doing, and we are the Church, so what is the Church doing to give people what is actually most needed at this moment.’
- So is a glass of cold water more than pure charitable acts of love to other people? What do they need most?
- Or in other words, ‘What is the role of the Church in a major pandemic?’
- Because what use is a cup of cold water when you are used to a 2 litre plastic bottle of Pepsi cola?
- Clearly the Church is there to offer comfort and support. To feed the hungry, visit those (at least by phone) in the prison of shielding, heal the sick by collecting prescriptions, listen to those who are anxious or depressed and comfort the bereaved by offering graveside services.
- Should we be doing more than this, or is this enough to be getting on with?
- Is there a role for the Church to keep people’s spirits up? To give hope? And if so, is it OK if this hope is empty words? Is it OK to say, ‘It’s alright, it’ll soon be over and everything will be OK.’?
- Will people achieve more if they are happy and hopeful, or if they are fed up and depressed?
- Come with me to consider the prophet Jeremiah, and see what he tells us.
- Jeremiah must win the prize for being the most political prophet in the Old Testament. He’s a fascinating character and it’s a fascinating if extremely complicated book.
- To put it in a rather large nutshell. Jeremiah was active during a time of great turmoil and disaster in Jewish history. It was a major national emergency like a pandemic except that this time it was hostile and opportunistic foreign forces on the border. Half of Jerusalem including the king had already been forcibly exiled to Babylon after King Nebuchadnezzar had attacked and the equivalent of the Crown Jewels purloined from the temple. A puppet king had been installed in Jerusalem. The prophet Hananiah, probably in the pay of this puppet king, saw it as his role to keep the spirits of the people high, by saying things like, “*Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord’s house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the Lord, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.*” That’s verses from just before today’s reading.
- And it’s to these words that Jeremiah replies, “*Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord fulfil the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the Lord, and all the exiles.*”
  - Can you hear the sarcasm in his voice?
- And how do you tell whether the prophet is a true prophet or not? Well, it’s surely whether his words come true. “*As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.*”

- So what is Jeremiah prophesying? Well, it's potentially traitorous. In another nutshell, he is saying, 'It's no good. You can't stand up to Nebuchanezzar. There's no point going to your allies the Egyptians for help. They're about to be conquered as well. Your only hope is to surrender. Then at least you'll escape with your lives.'
- If you imagine that happening outside the Houses of Parliament in December 1939 you get a feel for how cowardly and unpopular it would seem.
  - But it was Jeremiah who prophesied the truth.
- So what is the role of the Church in a major pandemic? And do you feel it has stepped up to the mark?
- You may not be surprised to hear that personally, I feel the Church has a vital role to speak the truth, however unpalatable that might seem. And if you've listened to one of my sermons or read even one of my emails you'll have a pretty good idea of what I believe the truth to be. Humanity is heading towards disaster with over-population, flagrantly using creation's resources instead of nurturing the planet and it has an increasingly self-centred thrust to the privileged society of which we are part, thinking it deserves an easy time. The pandemic is a natural reaction by creation to protect itself, so that, in effect, whatever damage we do to the ecosystem and to ourselves, the world will survive to blossom another day. That seems to me a God given, life-giving gift.
  - I see this in scripture, in experience and in, if not hours, then minutes of prayer.
- If you have talked to me you may also know that I believe that humanity is not going to learn from the warning of this pandemic, so that this is likely to be only the first disaster we are faced with. Whether the next is in 30 years times or 30 days' time I have no idea, but I believe, truly believe, it will come.
- However I am painfully aware that it is not a popular or a comfortable message I am peddling. I am also concerned that the wider Church does not seem to be peddling the same line at all. And I have to confess to being bemused by that.
  - But that is how Jeremiah must have felt. I feel like a particularly insignificant version of the prophet Jeremiah, just rather more affluent and comfortable.
- What about you? Where do you sit with all this? Do you think the Church has provided a lead? And if so, is it in the right direction?
- And what do you think of the line I am taking? Would it be more comfortable if I just preached about the Good Shepherd? But perhaps I am?
- What about the parish Churches of Baldock and Bygrave? What is the role of the local Church? To some extent they are saddled with me! But only those who have bothered to look beyond the venerable stones of the building will be aware of that. My perception is that many people know we are deeply involved in the caring for the parish that has gone on during lockdown but most people think of us as an institution rather than as a challenge. Should we be content with that? Is it better to be touchy-feely-nice to people (in a strictly distancing sort of way, of course), so we gain their confidence before we challenge too deeply? Should we buy people a 2 litre bottle of Pepsi cola to gain their confidence before handing them a cup of cold water? Or is it only by challenging that we are going to stop people looking at us as a kind of helpful body to go to in an emergency but then to ignore until we're needed again? Do we have a prophetic role such as the one I outlined earlier? And if so, how do we proclaim it so that people at least hear?
  - Whatever the answer, it probably needs more than just me, mumbling or scribbling away to the faithful. After all Jesus did not speak these words to just a few people. He spoke them to the crowds, to the Early Church, and to you and me today. So what is calling you, a member of his Church to do in this pandemic? Because it might be to challenge me!
- There are no easy or comfortable answers. However I'll finish with 2 verses you've heard already which encompass both the challenge and the uncertainty of what we are talking about.
- *'Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.' 'when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet.'* Please keep pondering! Amen.