



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Title: Being People of Hope

Readings:

Luke 12.49-56 Jeremiah 23.23-29 Hebrews 11.29-12.2

Sunday 17th August 2025

The Venerable Dr Susan Lucas

I'm old enough to remember the series *Dad's Army* – it punctuated my early Saturday evenings for much of my childhood, and you can still find re-runs of it on the BBC and elsewhere. If you've never seen it, it was a comedy based on the adventures of the Home Guard in a South Coast town in the Second World War. Each character had a catch phrase – 'you stupid boy!' if you were Captain Mainwaring, (Arthur Lowe) speaking to the hapless Private Pike, played by Ian Lavender – 'Don't panic!' said in tones of rising anxiety by Private Jones played by Clive Dunne, and who can forget Private Fraser, in dour tones announcing to all and sundry that, 'we're doomed, we're all doomed!'

There's a touch of that about our readings today – particularly our Gospel; it is full of apocalyptic imagery of conflict, fire and storm. Not perhaps something that, on the surface is encouraging.

Yet, if we look beneath the surface, there is cause for encouragement in our readings today.

Perhaps the apocalyptic imagery reminds us of our own times of upheaval and churn; some predictable perhaps and some imponderable; the horror of war and hunger, in the Middle East, and in the heart of Europe and elsewhere. And an earth that is scorched as those who are vulnerable begin to feel the very real effects of the climate change in which human greed has played its part. It can be bewildering at best, terrifying at worst. And, at times, the noise that comes from social media almost seems to encourage us in the thought that we're going to hell in a hand cart.

This is one temptation – of despair, and of battenning down the hatches – of which our readings warn us. And alongside it, another – that particularly emerges in Jeremiah – of the siren voices that speak with a false and crass optimism that God is on our side and ours alone.

In a way these two temptations are two sides of the same coin: of thinking we are helpless, either doomed or 'saved' - a stark polarity that is nothing to do with us, and in which there is nothing for us to do.

The Letter to the Hebrews makes clear how we are to resist these two poles of the same temptation; the letter was written to a marginal, persecuted Jewish Christian community, who felt beleaguered in ways that we perhaps can imagine – and some we probably can't.

First, we are to be a people of faith; after all, the apocalyptic imagery of the Gospel has already happened; it happened at the moment of the crucifixion, when the sky turned black, when Jesus' disciples were indeed divided and scattered. For the sake of our salvation, Jesus endured the Cross – the total loss of power and control, and in utterly abandoning power and violence, overcame them forever. We are called to be people of faith, because we don't have to save the world – in this extraordinary event, God has already done that; our task, is simply to have the faith that God has the power to bring good out of even the darkest of places, as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, to have 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' (Hebrews 11.1)

And second, of course, and connected with this, we are to be a people of hope. Jeremiah, perhaps surprisingly, is above all a prophet of hope; he is the one, who, commanded by God, buys a field in the midst of a siege (Jeremiah 32) – in a very real, concrete way, in the depths of the most difficult of places, that prophetic action shows that ordinary life goes on, that people will make homes again, and till fields, and flourish. Yet in the same passage, Jeremiah warns of false hope, blind optimism; true hope is not blind but is clear eyed and truthful that life can be very hard, and bitter and difficult and open to the tragic at times; and still, insistently and in very material and practical ways insists on God's 'and yet....'

So, what about us? Well, we too live amidst 'signs of the times' – wars and rumours of wars, violent conflict and the effects of climate change. It is all too easy, on the one hand to give in to despair, or, perhaps, in the Church, to 'big ourselves up' – and to see ourselves, and ourselves alone as 'saved.' Instead, as followers of the Crucified and Risen One, we are called to be people of faith, and hope and love, for the life of the whole world and all creation – and God promises us that, whilst we may not be able to make every kind of difference, each of us is called to make the unique, if small, difference that it is ours to make. And while we may feel overwhelmed, we will not finally be overcome. For, in the Christ who died for us and who lives for us, we are constantly renewed in faith, built up in hope and rooted and grounded in love. Amen.