

## Twenty third Sunday after Pentecost

27 October 2013

Sermon Preached by The Revd John Stewart

### Readings for the day:

**Jeremiah 14.7-10, 19-22**

**2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18**

**Luke 18.15-30**

A few weeks ago I was in Canberra for the National SD Conference. The keynote speaker was an American, a most distinguished teacher in SD circles and she gave 4 excellent addresses. IN the first she told a piece from the story of Alice in Wonderland. Alice in blue dress and white pinafore, with her hair plaited, is walking along and she falls down a rabbit hole. This, our speaker said, can be thought of as a metaphor for our own lives. Every now and again, unexpectedly and surprisingly, we find ourselves in a deep hole. How we respond to the crisis is what sorts us out as human beings.

In today's first reading the people of Israel find themselves in a very deep dark hole. They have been living in defiance of God and now they are to be taken off to live under the savage domination of a foreign power. Their city and temple in Jerusalem is to be destroyed. Jeremiah has been warning them over and over but they have rejected his message. In the end they throw him down a sewer to shut him up. But he presses on and stays faithful to his sense that God depends on him to pass on God's message.

In the second reading Paul is preparing to die. He looks back over his life and identifies lots of holes he has fallen into – choices he made, treatment he has endured. Now, writing to his young friend Timothy he can claim "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith". He looks forward to life with God eternally as proof that God's message can be trusted. He encourages Timothy to trust God and to follow Paul's example of faithful living in spite of all the challenges he had faced and holes he had fallen into..

And in the Gospel passage there are lots of rabbit holes. People bring infants to Jesus for blessing and the disciples shoo them away. They still have so much to learn. "It is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs", says Jesus. They didn't see that coming. The point of what Jesus is saying is that a child has no capacity to earn or pay for what it needs. Receiving everything as pure gift, it has nothing to give in response save affection and love. Such is the case with our life with God – God's unmerited, unearnable gift, calls simply for a response of grateful love. You may have noticed that this passage was read at the baptism of Prince George this week. We were expecting the Vicar to officiate but in the end the Archbishop of Canterbury did it. The Archbishop said "Baptism is, at its heart, about the gift of God. About God's gift of life, just ordinary physical life. But also the offer of spiritual life to all of us, of life forever." Jesus' welcome of the children and their receptivity to him is the perfect way of understanding the "welcome" extended to all in the love of God. And how beautifully it's expressed in that hymn we sang before the Gospel reading. It's a composition of the South Australian writer and composer Robin Mann. (At 10am Together in Song 491)

Then a wealthy ruler comes and asks Jesus the question about inheriting eternal life. He finds himself down a deep hole as he struggles to think about the implications of Jesus' reply. He has been doing all that his religion required of him, following the commandments. But Jesus suggests there is a leap to be taken beyond that. By selling all he owns and distributing the money to the poor he will replace his trust in his wealth with trust in God's love and that will set him on the path out of this hole towards eternal life in the company of Jesus. Too much is being asked and Luke tells us he becomes "sad". In his heart he knows what he wants. He has found the teaching and person of Jesus to be most attractive, but his attachment to his possessions gets in the way.

Jesus reflects on this by using a notoriously exaggerated saying "With what difficulty those with possessions enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle ...". The disciples fall into another hole by protesting that this makes salvation impossible. In fact the eye of the needle was the name of a small gate in the city wall around Jerusalem – it's still there and I have squeezed through it. Its purpose was to prevent camels entering the city – but every now and again one managed to enter. Jesus comments that God can achieve what is not possible for human beings.

This prompts Peter, speaking on behalf of the other disciples, to point out that they have in fact done what Jesus invited the rich ruler to do – they have left their homes and followed him. Then Jesus observes that such behavior will be rewarded with joy in this life as a foretaste of the life that is to come beyond this life.

There are three things to bear in mind when we find ourselves in such deep, dark places. Firstly, it's messy. We can't control it, or even understand it. We don't know how we ended up down there. It's not what we were planning that day. Secondly, it's scary. We have no idea where we are, or where to go. In the dark and unfamiliar place, what are we to do? The way to survive, to progress, to bring some sense to the experience is to give ourselves to our curiosity. Take a step forward, risk it, trust it won't be the end of us but will be the making of us. In this place there is a lesson to be learned, there is change to be made, it focuses our minds on what is important.

I wish you rabbit holes in the week ahead, and curiosity to explore them.