

**Sermon for Mattins,  
First Sunday of Lent 2020**

Several of you will have seen that the medieval Doom painting in the church of St Thomas a Becket in Salisbury has recently been restored. It's probably the finest of its kind in England. Dating from about 1470, it shows the virtuous being lifted to heaven by fleets of angels and sinners being gulped up by a fiery dragon in hell. Before they were covered up at the Reformation, such wall-paintings served as useful teaching aids to members of the congregation – reminding them to stay on the narrow path to salvation. And not just laypeople: Salisbury's Doom painting features a bishop and two kings being dragged into the fires of hell. No one escapes God's justice.

It was precisely such a message that Jeremiah struggled to communicate to the complacent leadership of Israel. He urged them to repent of their sin and to return to God, sensing all along that this would be fruitless. He would live to see Judah - as he foresaw it in our first reading - collapsing on the potter's wheel as Babylon sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple in 597BC. It's hard to find a modern comparison but the sacking of Berlin by the Soviets in May 1945 might come close. For Israel, as the whole nation collapsed, so did their understanding of God as operating on their terms. God had, as Jeremiah prophesied, 'devised a plan *against* them rather than *for* them'.

Jesus stood very much in this prophetic tradition. He quoted Jeremiah often and some even thought he was the prophet revived from the dead (Matthew 16.14). The parable we hear today is a good example: the Pharisee, like ancient Israel, is confident in his piety, standing alone praising God that he is not like the adulterers, sinners and that sinful tax-collector over there. Yet the same the tax-collector cries out to 'God, be merciful to me a sinner'. And it is such as him, humble and contrite, whom Jesus indicates will be justified and exalted in the kingdom of God.

Jesus' account of justice, echoed in the Salisbury Doom painting, resonates strongly for us in the Church of England, as God's justice has dented Establishment confidence: the Doom's judgment upon princes and bishops seems almost to have been delivered by the Independent Inquiry into Child Abuse, and even last week, many of us will have been left astounded by revelations that the founder of L'Arche, Jean Vanier, used his spiritual authority to make women sleep with him. Given how so many of us considered him a modern-day saint, it is a salient reminder to all of us - as Jesus warned us - that robes, the praise of others and the grandeur of the temple all must come with a spiritual health-warning.

Tolstoy tells a short story about a Russian bishop and several pilgrims travelling to the Solovetsky monastery near Archangel, and they hear of an island nearby where live three hermits quietly seeking the salvation of their souls. The bishop tells the captain of his boat that he would like to visit the hermits. When he lands on the islands, he enquires of them how they seek their salvation and serve God. They reply they don't know except they pray: "Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us." The bishop's somewhat dismayed by their lack of knowledge. He teaches them the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity and stays up until the early hours teaching them the Lord's Prayer. They stumble over the words but when he's satisfied they've learnt it, he gets back into the boat and sets off across the sea. While on board the vessel he realises that he's being followed and, in the darkness, he sees that the hermits are running across the water to him 'as though on dry land'. As the captain stops the boat, the hermits tell the bishop that they've forgotten the prayer and ask him to repeat it. The bishop's astounded and humbled. He replies, "Your own prayer will reach the Lord, men of God. It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners."

If then we do not want to find ourselves subject to the fiery justice of God's truth, let us discover again the simplicity of those hermits and the tax-collector: let us be honest in our prayers, simple in our language, speaking from the heart and unafraid to weep. "I tell you," Jesus said, "this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."