

Address by Nigel Guthrie for 21st August 2022

St David's, St Michael's, Exeter

21.8.22

9.30 & 11am

Trinity 10

The rain reached us in France last week a day or so before it got here. And it was a great relief to smell dampness in the air and on the ground, and just a day or so later it was wonderful to see some green returning to parched brown grass.

A few days before the rain arrived we had been staying near the great River Loire, one of the great rivers of Europe, which stretches more than 600 miles from the Massif Central in south-east France to St Nazaire on the west coast. It is a magnificent and life-giving river not to mention an amazing backdrop to the wonderful chateaux and beautiful towns and cities that line its route. It is also life-sustaining in another way in that its waters cool four nuclear Power Stations which generate nearly 20% of France's electricity. So, it was disturbing to see this normally broad and freely flowing river almost dried up in many places. Apparently it has been flowing at less than one twentieth of its annual average level with all the ecological and practical effects that has for marine life and boats. Where there would usually be a broad flowing river there were dried up banks of hard mud and sand. Combined with the huge forest fires there it was a sobering prospect for us as Francophiles; but how much more so for the French people and authorities there.

So, when I read the lesson from Isaiah for today I was particularly struck by the imagery the prophet uses. 'The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.' For those of us who live in relatively cool, damp England this image loses some of its force. But in the middle east, where the prophet lived, water would often have been scarce and the contrast between those places that were watered by rivers and those that were dry would have been dramatic, as it is today.

Isaiah is saying that God's blessing and our response will make the same difference as water in a dry land. And Isaiah is clear about what God needs from us by way of response: 'If you remove the yoke from among you' – by which I think he means the unjust treatment and exploitation of people – 'if you remove the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the need of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom will be like

the noonday.' Isaiah then goes on to use the image of parched places and ever flowing water to which I have just referred.

So, in other words, Isaiah says, our compassionate response to the needs of others has the power to transform this world from darkness to light and from drought to flourishing. That is quite a thought and a very good one when the challenges of the world are so pressing and apparently so far beyond our control. Our generosity to people in need, our willingness to find time to listen to others are powerful and positive, indeed essential aspects of God's mission in the world.

Isaiah then goes to speak about the value of the Sabbath and from refraining from pursuing our own interests on the day of rest. He emphasises the value of using the day of rest to find time to take delight in God. This is what which we do in our worship and what also gets squeezed out by our busyness and our preoccupation with all the things that get in the way of spending time with God.

I'm sure that we can all agree with that sense of needing to set aside time for God, or we probably wouldn't be here this morning! And I have to say it was rather delightful to be back in France where everything doesn't open on a Sunday and there is a sense of a day set apart, even though the country is now so secular. It's something we seem to have lost pretty comprehensively.

But for all the benefits of the Sabbath it became a bone of contention between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue. In our gospel reading we hear that Jesus stopped and took time to attend to a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years. When we speak to someone who is on a waiting list for a joint replacement or similar operation we can perhaps realise some of the agony which she will have suffered in that long wait for healing. And then through the loving and powerful intervention of Jesus the woman found herself made whole again. For the religious leaders this was too much and they accused Jesus of breaking the sabbath rest. But perhaps they had forgotten the injunction of Isaiah. The prophet insisted that people shouldn't look after their own interests on the sabbath day. But of course Jesus was looking to the interests of a long-suffering woman and he shamed the authorities by reminding them that they would lead their animals to water on the sabbath. Why then should this woman not immediately be released from her bondage to pain?

So in both of our readings the need for compassionate action is emphasised as a sign of God's loving care for all who are in need. Let us give thanks that we can participate through our generous and loving actions to the fulfillment of God's purposes here - and remember that we will be blessed in doing them. What loving action might we do, or what time to listen might we find this week?