

Address from Nigel Guthrie for the Second Sunday of Lent

Jeremiah 29: 11

‘For I know the plans I have for you’, declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.’

I suppose the word of the week might be ‘roadmap’. Many people were eagerly awaiting the government announcement on Monday when the stages for opening up society after the most recent lockdown were laid out for us.

It is a word which resonated with us at home too. Last weekend we went to consult the roadmap in our car only to find that the Devon pages were in an advanced state of decomposition. So a roadmap will need to be on our shopping list, when we are allowed to shop for such non-essentials. In spite of the wonders of Google Maps I still like to look at a proposed journey on a real map – or perhaps I should say a paper one! I like to get a mental picture of the journey so that I can imagine its shape and scope.

And I guess that is why the announcement was so eagerly awaited by many. We all wanted to have some idea about when we might be able to see loved ones again or go away for a break, or reopen businesses. And the government roadmap has certainly helped us to get a picture of what might happen when - even though, wisely, the dates are conditional on infections and hospital admissions falling and then staying low. In both of our readings today roadmaps are set out and they are not at all what the recipients were expecting. Abram, at the age of ninety nine, was told by God that he would become the father of a multitude of nations. The passage this morning doesn’t record his reaction but later in the same chapter we hear that Abram fell on his face and laughed at God’s plan. And in the next chapter when Sara, whose age is recorded as ninety, found out God’s plan she also laughed. Even if we take these advanced ages with a pinch of salt it seems ridiculous that such elderly people could have children and become the basis of an everlasting covenant between God and his people. The roadmap seemed crazy, but that is what God wanted and that is what happened.

Tina and I had been married for fifteen years when our first son was born. We had been regretfully getting accustomed to the idea that we would probably not have children, and were enjoying the company of a golden retriever! But then the unexpected happened and the past twenty two years have been joyfully shaped by the birth and growth of our sons.

But not all surprises are so welcome or positive. Sometimes our lives and the plan we imagine for them are interrupted, and disrupted, by negative events and experiences that we hadn’t anticipated. Sickness, relationship breakdown,

unemployment and bereavement can hit any of us and throw us off course. It is that sort of dislocation that we have experienced as a society in the past year. I can hardly believe that just one year ago most of us still had little idea about the what the coming year would bring. Just as well, we might say. Most of us brought up since the war have experienced improving health care, growing material wealth, and lack of war on our own soil. Perhaps that has made this past year even more of a shock?

‘For I know the plans I have for you’, declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.’ If God had a plan for last year I can’t attempt to understand it or to explain it to you.

And that puts me in good company because the road map which we heard Jesus lay out for his disciples in today’s gospel reading was neither understood nor appreciated. If anything it went down even worse than God’s plan that Abram and Sara should become the parents of a multitude of nations in their dotage. Jesus began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the Jewish establishment and be killed and after three days rise again.

Peter really didn’t like that road map. He took Jesus to one side and started to rebuke him. But Jesus rebuked Peter in turn saying ‘Get behind me, Satan’. And explained to his followers how they must take up their cross and follow him. He showed them that that couldn’t have it all ways. But if they were willing to give up their lives, they would ultimately save them.

In the Diocesan Lent Course which some of us are following we are attempting to find words to describe our experiences over the past year stimulated by the video stories of others recorded by Christians in Devon. When we have a tragedy or major loss in our lives it is good to try and express what it means to us and how it affects us. The process of articulating what has happened can help us to feel that we own it, rather than it owning us. And the aim of the Lent Course is to help us come to terms with the past year in way that is realistic but also hopeful. We can’t turn the clock back and bring back those who have died or regain lost opportunities or events. But we can consider how we might live and love better. We can give thanks for the good things that have come out of this time.

The Christian life is about living well in the present, seeking to love and serve those around us, and rejoicing in God’s hope. But it is also about looking forward to the resurrection life that God has promised us through Jesus Christ and preparing ourselves for that eternal life which is the final destination of our journey.