

# **'Looking for a better country'**

Sermon on Hebrews 11.16

by Rev Canon Mark Pilgrim 11<sup>th</sup> August 2019

'They desire a better country'. Hebrews 11.16 – what a gift to preachers today this verse from Hebrews is! 'They desire a better country...that is, a heavenly one'.

As October 31st and the countdown to Brexit day 'do or die' approaches, this nation's relationship with the land we live on is facing more change than it has experienced in many generations. If and when Brexit happens, some British citizens will revel in the independence they feel will have been achieved: others will despair at the isolation they feel will have resulted. According to the referendum polling figures, a majority of English and Welsh citizens who voted for Brexit in 2016 should be pleased: a majority of those who voted against Brexit in Scotland and Northern Ireland are likely to be unhappy. There are big questions to address in relation to how people, especially those who live in the British Isles -

including those who live in all parts of Ireland - relate not only to their land but also to those in other lands.

Our two readings this morning offer us some interesting lessons on how human beings relate to land. Firstly they include two different forms of relationship and, secondly, they provide some interesting pointers as to how we might respond to some of the current political and other challenges ahead.

What, then, are the two ways our readings describe the relationship between people and land?

First of all, our Gospel passage sees Jesus use the motif of the homeowner, the 'possessor of property', as a means of recommending that faithful people be vigilant for the coming of God's kingdom. When you are a home owner, when it is 'your property' that's at stake, says Jesus, then you are likely to be super alert to threats from thieves and so prepare accordingly. In the same way, he recommends his followers to be vigilant, super alert and ready to act to participate in the coming of God's kingdom.

One might also say that Jesus takes on board the realities of personal possession and property rights with his extended reference in this teaching to masters and slaves. In this passage, slaves are clearly at the mercy and disposal of good and bad, cruel and kind masters or slave owners. Jesus isn't critiquing this power imbalance in human relationships at this point: he is simply using it to teach his lesson about vigilance.

Both the gospel reading and the passage from Hebrews, however, have alternative perspectives on human beings' relationships with land. The Hebrews text explores the relationship of God's Chosen People to the land of Israel. This relationship, says the author of Hebrews, is to be guided primarily by faith. It's all about a covenant relationship between God who makes all things and human beings who are entrusted with good stewardship of all that God provides. In the covenant relationship in which faith is key, human beings best see themselves as 'aliens and strangers' - not just once or occasionally but ALWAYS.

The author of Hebrews describes Abraham 'staying in the land he had been promised as in a foreign land,

living in tents'. And this refugee status was recommended and enjoined not only for the great Abraham but for every succeeding generation thereafter.

Being in a position not of power and possession but sitting lightly to matters of property is also a key feature of the passage from Luke we have already briefly explored. Yes, there's an illustration about being vigilant for the coming of God's kingdom which refers to home ownership, but the bulk of the passage has a different perspective: just as does our passage from Hebrews, this passage urges that we see our relationship to God and to the land and resources God provides as being in essence a matter of faith and stewardship. Seeing the true ownership of all things as lying in God, it teaches, should be at the core of who we are and how we live.

The opening words of Luke 12 begin the lesson: 'It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'. 'Sell your possessions' it says. So, firstly: the kingdom of this world - the Earth - is not ours...it's God's. And, of course, we do well to remember this in terms of ecology as well as economics. Then, secondly: sell your possessions is

surely a reminder to sit lightly to what we think we own. Vocations to total poverty, Francis of Assisi style, are not given to everyone. Nevertheless our attitudes both to the environment and to the economy should be of good stewardship and not outright ownership.

We are, continues Luke, to surrender ourselves to a greater power - to the life-giving power of our sovereign God who invites us to be as obedient to his will as was his incarnation in human flesh, Jesus of Nazareth. Verses 33 and 34 reflect this lesson most fully: 'Blessed is the slave whom the master finds at work when he arrives. Truly, I tell you, he will put that one in charge ('make them the steward') of all his possessions.'

Can you, with me, find some significant connections here between stories in the media not just from this country but from other parts of the world too about the relationship of human beings to the land on which they live - or seek to live?

What is the relationship of the different nationalities in the British Isles to the land on which we live? Are we English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh first? Are we

citizens of the UK or of Great Britain and Northern Ireland or of the island of Ireland? Do we possess any part of the British Isles- or are we stewards of these particular islands, entrusted with their flourishing on land and at sea on God's behalf?

And what about other countries? Interestingly, our reading from Hebrews has this verse: the early Israelite leaders 'confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth... seeking a homeland'. 'Homeland security' is hugely significant in American politics. What might these readings have to say to the current US administration and to those with violence in their hearts as this nation of sometimes very recent immigrants (the President, being only second generation himself) seeks to keep out those who wish, like their recent forbears, to find a new and better life in the land of the free?

There are many possible lessons to draw from these rich readings. But the one I invite you to savour this morning is this:

Wherever we find ourselves on God's earth, whether in England, Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the UK, the British Isles, Europe or the world, we are, first

and foremost, politically and ecologically, citizens of God's kingdom. God invites us to be stewards and not owners of all God has given and entrusted to our care.

Let's remind ourselves once again of those opening words in Luke chapter 12: 'it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'...the gift is from God Almighty, entrusting the kingdom to joint stewardship between God and ALL the people of God's creation.

Let us pray:

Sovereign God, by your Spirit, may we see ourselves as stewards of your Earth - this land, economy and environment of the British Isles - and of all its people. May we be true citizens of your kingdom in our care for your world and all its people. This we ask through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.