



The service, which was attended by 250 MPs, peers and parliamentary staff, marked the new Parliament with prayer and worship.

It was conducted by the Rector of St Margaret's and Sub-Dean of Westminster Abbey, the Ven Andrew Tremlett, and the Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Revd Prebendary Rose Hudson-Wilkin.

The readings were given by the Lord Speaker, the Rt Hon The Baroness D'Souza, and the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Rt Hon John Bercow MP.

The prayers were read by senior parliamentarians, including the new Second Church Estates Commissioner, the Rt Hon Caroline Spelman MP.

Read the full sermon below.

Archbishop of Canterbury's sermon at the Service for the New Parliament, St Margaret's Church, Westminster Abbey, London, 9 June 2015.

Jeremiah 29: 10-14; John 13:1-14

First of all I would like to say thank you for the great privilege of being invited to speak at this service. Over the last couple of weeks in thinking about this sermon I've been trying to put myself in your shoes, but find it almost impossible to do. There are those who work at the Palace of Westminster, in the Houses of Parliament, in all sorts of different ways, who are here today, for whom this is yet another Parliament – one of many they will have seen, maybe the second or it might be far more than that.

And no doubt they will sit here with a faint sense of déjà vu wondering who's going to be a problem and who's going to be helpful and all the various other things that running something as complex as the Houses of Parliament necessarily involves.

There'll be the people on whom we all depend constantly and who we need to thank daily.

There are those in the House of Lords who have not gone through the election campaign directly but they will have been very heavily involved, not for their own seats but in others, or for the cause of their party.

There are the Members of the House of Commons. I felt especially for them for the emotional impact of the hard work that is required for an election campaign, and I have family who have fought campaigns – almost invariably losing them, to be honest – on both sides; I need to stress that.

So I'm aware of the pressure it puts on people. The huge amount of hard work, followed by a sense of either exhilaration or disappointment that

inevitably comes with the results – that is very hard to imagine.

There are many different emotions here today. That is why the readings today have deliberately been chosen to pick up two moments in the Bible that have much emotion attached.

The reading from Jeremiah speaks of the consequences of God's judgement – and the reading from John's Gospel of what it means in practice to be a community of values with a moral vision.

Jeremiah was a prophet of the sixth century BC in the kingdom of Judah. Judah had survived for half a millennium, more or less. But in the end, a combination of political miscalculation and other factors meant that the kingdom was overrun, and after a long and horrific siege (if you want to see what it feels like read Jeremiah's Lamentations) the city fell. In two great waves the leaders of the nation – those who had survived – were taken on a death march to Babylon.

Jeremiah had prophesied the defeat because the nation had fallen away from God's standards. Once the exiles were in Babylon they wrote to Jeremiah, asking what they should do now. One of the key parts of his answer is in that first reading.

The essence of those verses, and those around them, is writing to the exiles at this moment of the deepest possible blackest despair that we can imagine. His answer was this: you're going to be there a very long time (that's bad news), settle down and bless the community in which you live. ('But these are the people who massacred us,' you can hear them think.) The circumstances in which you find yourselves are not a cause for despair, but for reflection on the past and a renewal of confidence in the God who is greater than all of history.

And in fact, in due course, virtually uniquely among the people of that area they were brought back from exile.

The people of Judah suffered the consequences of their turning away from God to other gods, of seeking to find alternative values not based in truth – the absolute truth of the revealed God – but in what was convenient and easy.

Their society had been corrupted by materialism as the ultimate aim of existence, and by injustice and neglect for the poor.

Let me be absolutely clear. I am not hinting or suggesting in any way at all that anyone here is guilty of such things. One of the privileges of my role is getting to know so many people in politics, and the more I do the clearer it is that almost everyone I meet seeks to do what is right, to make just decisions, and to serve their country with integrity. Views to the contrary are mere descents into cynicism.

Yet the best intentions can lead to the wrong conclusions. First, Jeremiah says, we reap the consequences of our actions – and thus those actions must be based in a moral vision and in an ideal that is founded on eternal values that do not change.

Throughout the Old Testament, time after time after time, from Genesis to Malachi, these values include justice for the poor, reaching out to the stranger, integrity without partiality in government, and a dedication to the flourishing of the whole community.

Secondly, God is also saying through Jeremiah that even when things go wrong, which in all societies they will from time to time because we are all human (and let me say the Church of England is not one to lecture others on how to be perfect), God is greater than our greatest failures.

We have to seek to do right, but we can trust in the providence and salvation of God for the future. That is the promise made to the people of Judah, and thus they were to settle down amongst their enemies; to make the best of their situation, to bless the communities in which they lived, and look to the moment of their redemption.

There is no coded political message in this, but there is a very un-coded theological one: God can be trusted, but we must do our part. And I know that is the belief and desire of the vast majority here today.

So pragmatism does not really work. Yet all politics is in the end about delivery, not merely policy. Stating policies is the easy bit; making them happen is the deepest of skills.

Pragmatism in the sense of short cuts to avoid difficulty is not a good solution. It had taken Judah to defeat and exile. But pragmatism in the sense of being practical and down to earth – of making sure that delivery happens – is essential.

In the reading from John 13 we see the greatest moment of holy pragmatism in history. The Son of God Himself, Jesus – knowing confidently who He is, what He is intended for, and that God can be trusted – sets aside His pride and washes the feet of His disciples.

The truest leadership is about service. And note that He even washes the feet of Judas Iscariot, knowing as He does that this is the man who will betray Him to torture and agony within twenty-four hours.

This truly is holy pragmatism. It is the pragmatism of love without limit, of unconditional love that reaches with generous, almost absurd grace to every person.

Such pragmatism costs more than we can imagine and gains more than we can believe. And yet it is the pragmatism to which we are all called, as human beings, but especially those of you here, as national leaders.

So we have two moments: in the first of them a nation in despair is told that God can be counted on despite all their failures. The failures matter. Actions have consequences. But they are never the end of the story: God is.

And secondly, the pragmatic holiness of God Himself, washing the feet of His enemies, of His disciples, because He knows absolutely, although

fully human yet He is in the hands of God and need not fear either humiliation, or defeat.

The action of foot-washing takes the tortured emotions of the disciples, utterly fearful of what is about to happen, and transforms them into those who overthrew an empire with the force of love.

The nation in which we live, which we love and serve, has within it at all levels a moral vision and hope. Its potential in a world of darkness to be a force for light and hope is limitless. We recognise often its own past mistakes, trust in God for the future, and serve with humility, knowing that it is God who glorifies.

My prayer for you – for all at the Palace of Westminster, all connected with the Houses of Parliament – which is a prayer that I pray daily, with much affection for those who take on the huge responsibilities that you endure, is for you to find the courage, the strength and the confidence to lead us into what we can be.

Amen.

8 min read

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