

**'Ask for the ancient paths'...**

Last week Leah and I climbed Snowdon. We went up what is known as the Snowdon Ranger path – which is said to be one of the oldest routes up the mountain ... It's also not the easiest path to take – and hence is quite a bit quieter.

We began to walk quite early in the morning, getting to the little carpark just before 8, and as we began to climb we climbed into thick cloud. It was cold and damp and we could no longer see the path stretching out in front of us. Instead we relied on the cairns – the piles of rocks – left along the edges of the path. They were quite re-assuring, looking for the next one and heading towards it reminded us that we were heading along the right way.

I hope you can spot where I'm going with this – the Jeremiah passage this evening spoke of **'ancient paths'**, following ancient paths. What did this mean for Jeremiah's listeners – what might this mean for us?

**'Stand at the cross roads and look'**, I think this is probably describing where the people are at this point, perhaps literally, but I think metaphorically. Jeremiah is speaking to people who had begun to wander away from God, who had made tradition the thing, relying not on God, but on themselves, they had become materialistic, corrupt and unjust.

And this was the status quo. This was how it was ... Jeremiah standing up and saying **"look for the ancient paths"** was like telling people to "turn back now, before you go too far" as the city was about to be under siege, the people were heading back to exile, it was a cross roads ...

But the people did not listen, **"we will not walk in it"**! They didn't want to hear what was coming – it was like the city ignoring the trumpets of the watchmen. Jeremiah was such a watchman – sounding and heralding what was going to happen, and they refused to listen. And so disaster was to come upon them – if you read later on in the book of Jeremiah this is exactly what did happen – the city was destroyed and the people scattered.

What was the biggest problem? What was it they were doing most wrong?

Well it was their 'religiosity' their burnt offerings and sacrifices, whilst diligently given weren't given with true repentance, or care for what was going on, they paid pure lip service to God. It didn't impact on them, it didn't change them, it didn't affect the way they chose to live their life, they just did as they pleased and thought themselves fine as they did all the right things.

Even Paul, writing some time later was accusing people of the same thing, not all who are Israel are Israel, nor are they Abraham's children – basically because they were rejecting the good news of Jesus and not changing, not moving from their religiosity to a true and meaningful revelation of the truth found in the death and resurrection of Jesus as revealed to us in scripture and confirmed through the Holy Spirit.

How often could we be accused of the same thing? Perhaps not the whole thing, but perhaps at times?

How often do we pay 'lip service' to faith, to God? Do we go to church 'just because' ... Do we follow tradition 'because we always do it this way'... do we know why we follow traditions? Do we know what they are for? And decide for ourselves to follow them ... or do we just do them – out of duty, out of peer pressure?

There's immense value in asking the question: **'Hold on – why do we do this the way we do this?'**

I heard a story of someone who would always trim the ends off their Sunday roast – when their daughter asked why, they said: **'oh, not sure, go and ask Grandma'** – so they asked Grandma, and she wasn't sure either, so they asked their Great Aunt who told them **that they cut the ends off the meat so that it could fit in the small oven they had! Now they had a bigger oven there was no need to cut off the ends** – but they still did it without knowing why!

Now I'm not completely against tradition here – tradition is in everything, in sports, parliament, life and in faith – traditions bring strength and solidarity.

I friend of mine once said: **'A good tradition is like a road.'**

Now Whitchurch has the A41, the A49 and the A525 ... They are good roads, useful things – they take us off to Shrewsbury, Chester, Wrexham or further off to the sea, to Snowdon even. But roads in themselves are a means to an end aren't they? You don't set out to "go" to a road, you set out to "go" to a destination along a road. You wouldn't have a day trip to the A49 would you?

Tradition, when good, and understood and used well and correctly brings us to God, brings us to faith, helps us remain connected – helps us to follow the ancient path – as the path to God. But when tradition becomes *'the'* thing then it loses its sense. It loses its purpose, its meaning, it becomes something that grows stale and outdated, something life draining, not life giving.

But I think sometimes we do make *'tradition'* *the* thing – the thing we choose to follow far more than the destination – the call to follow Jesus, to proclaim him, to go and tell ... Whether that is something big or something small, tradition should lead us to God. If we are doing something that is *'tradition'* but isn't leading us or others to God, maybe we should review it ...

If we are just paying lip service, just going to church on a Sunday because we always do, but not actually letting it change how we live our lives ... Or deciding who is *'in'* or who is *'out'*... or deciding how people *have* to do things when they have encounters with God ... yes be discerning – but also expect God to work in the unexpected way!

Perhaps we can ask God to send his Holy Spirit to guide us into truth, light and life. To shake us up and change us from making the road our destination, turning instead to Jesus.

Ask the question – this week: **'How are my family, my neighbours, the community of Whitchurch hearing the good news, the transforming salvation of Jesus. And how am I facilitating that?'**

Look for the ancient paths – churches have always been at the forefront of communities, providing practical and spiritual support, education, health, justice, advocacy, hope.

I don't think it's God calling us to go and climb up mountains – literally or figuratively ... But here it's not a literal *'path'* it's more like a way of being – a way that asks the travellers that have gone before, those on the journey already and seeking their wisdom and their ways – learning why we do what we do, and considering carefully their place now. Otherwise we are like that family chopping off perfectly good meat!

### **To come back to Snowdon ...**

When we came back down the hill the mist had cleared, the cloud was gone and as we picked our way back along that ancient path the scenery around us was dramatic, hills, wildlife, mountains all around that we hadn't seen before ...

The ancient path had led us to a hill top by diligently following it and seeking it out, and then on the way down it was like the same path had transformed what we could see around us.

Seeking where, how and why God has been at work in generations past could transform the way we view things and see what is around us in new ways and in a new light, no longer in the fog, blindly following, but in the light of the truth of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.