

They who sow the wind

Readings: Hosea Chapter 8, verses 1-7a; Chapter Luke 3, verses 1-9

The words of Hosea, spoken over 2500 years ago, have a startling relevance for us today. "Those who sow the wind ..." Hosea is outlining a law of inevitable retribution. He lived at a time when Israel was in a state of national decline, economically, politically and morally. Hosea attributed this decline to a loss of faith. The people had cast aside belief in God and deliberately flouted God's law. Hosea warned that God would surely punish them, but not be personally intervening to bring them low. God's punishment would be by way of allowing the consequences of their actions to play out. God will punish them by **not** intervening. This is a far cry from what many Christians believe. But it's a consistent theme that runs through the Bible. Paul argued the same thing when he wrote to the Romans. He said that God exercised judgement by giving them over to the consequences of their own actions. And elsewhere he made the point that whatever a man sows that will he also reap.

This truth was vividly brought home to me when we went to Zimbabwe a couple of weeks ago. In 1980, after 15 years of guerrilla warfare Ian Smith's white Government was toppled — undone by the patronising and paternalistic racialism which denied equal rights to blacks. Mugabe took over and in the 35 years since he practised a reverse racialism and has meant appalling suffering for blacks as well as whites. I don't know whether to cry or to be angry with what has happened. The whole infrastructure of the country has been destroyed. The roads are full of potholes. Power cuts happen every day and sometimes last for a week. The road to Kariba once ran through a rich farmland which came to be known as the breadbasket of Central Africa. Travelling that same road two weeks ago and the land is returning to bush. Huge grain silos at Karoi and Lions Den stand empty. Alongside the road the telegraph poles stand at crazy angles or else lie flat on the ground. Power cuts are an everyday fact of life, and water supplies are erratic. If you don't have your own borehole your house is worth nothing on the market. And the currency has collapsed. So much so that the worthless Zimbabwean dollar has been replaced by the American dollar. The breadbasket of Central Africa has become a basket case. Ian Smith sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind in the form of Mugabe's government. Mugabe has sowed the wind and the whirlwind is terrible to behold. I simply could not believe the destructive impact of this second whirlwind.

Yet this same law of retribution applies to all of us and to all of life. We are not punished for our sins; we are punished BY our sins. You see it most vividly in those who are addicted either to alcohol or drugs but that's at the extreme end of things. Far more insidious is the selfishness to which we are all prone; best illustrated in the story Jesus told about the Prodigal Son. The younger son came to his father and demanded, "*Father, give me*". And that "give me" attitude was the essential reason for him ending up as a farm labourer and eating pigs food. For a Jew that was the ultimate humiliation and that same attitude of a greedy, grasping selfishness leads to the wreckage of so many lives. Translate that into our social life and then into the politics that govern our national life and the end result is always the same. We sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.

It would be easy enough to leave it there — a statement of the inevitable. And were I merely a politician I could perhaps leave it there. But it is different for a Christian preacher. The gospel is about **Good News and Hope**. And I confess that my experience of Zimbabwe leaves me struggling to find a Christian Hope.

The Christian Hope is not that God will unilaterally intervene in spite of us. It is that God will work in us and through us to create a new humanity. Paul offered the clue when he wrote "*If any man is in Christ he is a new creature*" and the Greek can also be translated "*If any man is in Christ there is a new creation*". That alternative translation widens the scope of our Hope from the purely personal to include a social and community dimension. Yes; and even a political dimension.

It would be easy simply to say that Zimbabwe needs a new Government if it is to survive. But it would also be facile to say that. It was Studdert Kennedy who remarked that when you change your Government you put one lot of sinners out and another lot of sinners in. He was not being cynical, — just realistic. That applies not only to Zimbabwe and perhaps we might bear it in mind come May and the General Election!

What settles it in my mind is the thought that, when God wanted to save the world, He did so by becoming man. What chance did one man have?

Yet the coming of Christ had an impact far beyond imagining and changed the world. I am not sure that God's strategy has changed. And the Church, which is the Body of Christ in the world today, is charged with continuing His mission. That mission is not just about saving souls; it is about establishing the Kingdom of God which, by definition is a Community in which Justice and Peace prevail.

Two stories from the days of the Early Church inspire me.

One is of what happened when plague broke out and decimated whole villages. Everyone ran for their lives — except the Christians who stayed behind to care for the sick and bury the dead. And word got around saying; *"See how these Christians love"*.

The other instance is recorded in the Bible. Paul and his companions arrived in the area of Thessalonika and the locals threw up their hands in horror. *"The people who have turned the world upside down have come here also!"* I don't hear people saying that today. In fact the reverse. We have been around for years and everybody simply ignores us!

I began with Hosea's words of Divine retribution. Those who sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind. I end with those same words but in another context. The same word for "wind" in Hebrew is the same word used for "spirit". What if we sow love, joy, peace, kindness, justice which are the fruit of God's Spirit. Imagine the whirlwind which would follow.