

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's the last Sunday that we'll be thinking about the prophet Jeremiah. We've been focusing on the readings from that book over these last five weeks, and at first sight it might look like a bit of an anticlimax, the reading that we've just heard. It seems a bit odd that a real estate deal should be described in such detail in the Bible.

My mother lives in a nice village called Chobham. It's not a big village, and you get the feel when you're there that nothing much happens. The feeling is reinforced by the headlines that have featured over the years in the Chobham News, the local paper. I've made a point of noting them. Let me share some of the classics with you, and I should say these aren't just on the front page. They're on a sandwich board that you see outside the news agents: "Fury after bus fails to appear", "Oven removed from house", "Woman finds hat in a tree", "Kitten chokes on mouse", "Hunt for missing pet owl", "Yawning almost kills man".

Is this the biblical equivalence? "Prophet buys field", seems similarly uninteresting and anticlimactic. That's how it looks at first sight, but that would be to miss the importance of the context of the story. When we put it in context we can see that it's not quite as dull as those headlines. The people of Israel were under siege. This is the darkest hour in their history. The catastrophe which Jeremiah has been preaching for years ... If you've been in previous weeks, you'll have seen, he's always preaching doom. That catastrophe is about to happen. It's imminent. The Babylonian army is camped around Jerusalem and getting ready for battle. The people of Israel have no chance. The Babylonians are bound to win. They're about to come in, take over the land, and carry the people off into exile.

Things look bad for the people of Israel. They look even worse for Jeremiah, as he's already been arrested and he's under armed guard in the Royal Palace. Yet, when his cousin comes to him he does a deal and buys a field at Anathoth. How the people must have laughed at him. "You're nuts," they said. Well, they probably reached that conclusion well

before now with Jeremiah. "We're about to be overrun by the Babylonians. They're going to take over all our land, our possessions. We're going to be carried away and you're buying a field. What a waste of money."

But it wasn't that Jeremiah was crazy, it's just he could see more. He could see beyond the imminent catastrophe. He could see that God's impending judgment on Israel was not the last word. He could see a brighter future that nobody else could. Look how the reading ends, "Thus says the Lord, houses, and fields, and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." Jeremiah's purchase of the field was an investment in the future that nobody else could see.

It will come as a surprise to those who've heard the sermons in the last five weeks to hear Jeremiah upbeat and positive. We've had weeks of unending gloominess, and there is a certain amount of irony in the fact that after months and years of predicting impending doom, when the doom comes Jeremiah is at his most positive and upbeat. What Jeremiah reveals to us, I think, is a difference between optimism and hope.

If you've heard one of the previous sermons on Jeremiah, you'll know that there's no way that Jeremiah could be considered an optimist. I'm sure he was called many things in his lifetime, but not that, and yet what we see in this story is that at the end he emerges as a man of great hope. That's what he's doing here. He's holding out a hope that nobody else can see.

On this feast day of Saint Michael and All Angels, we're reminded that we too are a people of hope. So let me offer two reasons why Jeremiah was hopeful, but not optimistic. Firstly, Jeremiah saw a future that was different. When everyone else in Jerusalem was trying to hide from the Babylonians that were about to besiege the city Jeremiah was going about his business. When everything's being reduced to rubble and laid waste Jeremiah was buying a field. That's because Jeremiah saw beyond the battles of the present to a future that was transfigured.

Remember how the reading ends, "For thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, houses and fields and

vineyards shall again be bought in this land." In the midst of the present crisis Jeremiah saw a glimmer of hope, and so with us we hear a rumor of angels. It's a rumor that speaks of the fact that the material world with which we are so familiar is not all that there is. There's a spiritual realm inhabited by the angels.

We were talking about angels in our staff meeting on Tuesday. We did our normal custom of looking at the reading set for today, and we said, "Oh, well there's not much in the Bible about angels," and then we kept listing them and we all kept coming up with different references to angels. Just think of the Christmas story, they pop up all over the place. They're never the center of attention, but they're there in the background throughout the biblical story. They point to a realm beyond the material.

I often think of that realm as being like a country that you pass through on a train at night. If you've been on a speeding train and it's dark outside you know the feeling when you're going flat out, which trains in America never seem to do, but anyway. Just imagine there was a train going fast and you're going through a city and you pick up speed and you see every now and again that there are lights. You see a collection of lights. You know you're going through a town but you can't describe it. You can't say anything about it. You can't name it because you can't read the signs, you're going that fast. You can't pick out the details. So it is with the realm of the angels. They inhabit what we can't see, what we can't describe in detail, but what we know is there.

We have a hope in a world beyond our own and that hope is grounded supremely in the person of Jesus Christ, the God whom the angels worship in that heavenly realm, the one who came down from Heaven, the Bible says, to make Himself known in the person of Jesus. He is a sure ground for hope.

Secondly, Jeremiah was a person of hope and not mere optimist because his hope for the future led to action in the present. Hope is not the same as wishful thinking. Optimism can easily become the kind of wishful thinking that says, "Oh, everything's going to be all right in the end, as I bury my head in the sand. If I keep my head in the sand long enough it will all go away. Optimism doesn't take despair seriously, it

simply pretends it isn't there, that it's about to dissipate.

We know that Jeremiah took despair very seriously. He was an expert in despair. He lamented at length about the travails of the age. His hope for the future expressed in this passage helped him to name sin and evil for what it was and led him to work in the present towards the Kingdom that he saw would one day be established. Hope is not escapist. It engages with the injustice of the present world because it knows there is a better way, that there is a better day coming.

The philosopher Nietzsche, like many others, failed to grasp this important point. When he told his readers to, and I quote, "Remain faithful to the earth and don't believe those who speak to you of other worldly hopes." Poppycock.

It's because we have a hope grounded in a changed future that we're called to make a difference in the present. In so doing we're faithful to the hope that is within us as we play our part in the transfiguration of the present. The banality of shallow optimism is based on the notion that everything will work itself out. Hope involves the work of serious commitment. So, may we, like Jeremiah, be a people of hope, not content to be merely optimistic. Let us cultivate a sure hope grounded in the reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Let us dare to look at the despair and injustice of the world and not be content to say, "Oh, it'll be all okay in the end." Rather, let us strive to work with God on the side of the angels and work to establish the Kingdom that will one day be built amongst us. Amen.