
Learning to Dream Again

Jeremiah 32.1-15, Luke 16.19-31

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 30, 2007 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I once taught a class to a group of trainee youth workers. I was asked to speak on the Ten Commandments. I asked each person in the class to suggest an eleventh commandment. Most of the class came up with something involving the word “respect.” As ever, one wise guy said “Don’t get caught.” But one student offered something completely different. He said “Live the dream.” I regret to say I laughed, breaking all the rules of teaching 101. I said “Er, do you mind me asking which dream that might be exactly?” He said “I’m not sure, but I still think we should all live the dream.”

Today’s Old Testament reading is set against the backdrop not of a contemporary classroom but of war and despair. The year is 587 B.C., and the Babylonians have been besieging Jerusalem for some time. The promised land is in enemy hands, the people of God are about to be transported a thousand miles east into exile, and the dream of everlasting life for Israel under God is about to die. Jeremiah is in prison for saying that the city is doomed. But he gets a word from the Lord to go and buy a field in his home town of Anathoth, a few miles to the north of Jerusalem. And he does so. The story underlines the care with which he completes the transaction, bizarre as his doing so may appear. By almost any standards it’s a crazy thing to do. What use is real estate when you’ve already been invaded and you’re about to be exiled? It’s like buying uninsured property in New Orleans the day before Katrina hit.

The punch line comes at the end of the story: “For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” This appears to be a story of the eccentricity of a prophet who’s gone off his rocker, or a man obsessed with hoarding the family’s landholdings even when they are no good to him. But it turns out to be an astonishing story of hope. While everyone is in denial about today and in despair about tomorrow, seeing only the tidal wave of Babylonian power coming hurtling toward them, Jeremiah is making plans for 50 years’ time, when the exile will be over, and a title deed could be mighty handy. Buying a field is a gesture that says, “I believe God will one day bring us home, and when that day comes, I want to be ready and waiting” – or, as I have learned to say in America, “Good to go.”

Sometimes the world of the Bible seems so far away we struggle to relate it to our own. But I learned a lot from one of our interns at the Chapel last year, David Hollis. He had the gift of articulating things simply. I remember him saying, the Bible tells us how God has done unbelievable things, most of all in Jesus. And the way we show our belief in Jesus is to do unbelievable things too. The way to follow the God of the Bible is to do unbelievable things.

Leo Baeck was a man who did unbelievable things. He was one of the leaders of the Jewish community in Germany during Hitler’s rise to power. The Jews of course had little idea of the absolute horror that was to come, but Rabbi Leo Baeck was a key figure in organizing the various ways that Jewish people envisaged life beyond the growing terror. Perhaps his story is particularly precious to me because my mother was born in Berlin in 1930 into a family that had only recently converted from Judaism to Christianity. She came to Britain in 1938 as an 8-year-old girl. If it hadn’t been for people like Leo Baeck, she would never have left Germany, and would probably not have survived the Holocaust. In the summer of 1939 Leo Baeck brought a trainload of schoolchildren like my mother to safety in Britain. One friend said to him, “You seem to have got here just in time.” He corrected her: “I’ve got here just in time – to go back.” He went back to Germany because he believed God had not finished with his people. It was an unbelievable thing to do.

Leo Baeck’s journey back to Germany in 1939 is like Jeremiah’s purchase of the field at Anathoth, because in the immediate circumstances of the time it made no sense at all. Just as you’d think any resident of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. would be trying to realize assets as fast as possible, not acquiring more real estate, so you’d think any Jew in 1939 wouldn’t be traveling back to Germany, they’d be hurrying as far away from Germany as possible. But

Leo Baeck's journey doesn't just illuminate Jeremiah's field; it reminds us of the journey of Jesus Christ, from heaven to earth, from Galilee to Jerusalem. Jesus' journey from the heart of the triune God to the heart of human rejection of God was an unbelievable thing for God to do. Jesus' journey up to Jerusalem, to the place of danger, betrayal and death, was an unbelievable thing to do. But just as Jeremiah's gesture only makes sense in the light of his conviction that Israel would return from exile, so Jesus' march down the way of the cross only makes sense in the light of his conviction that God would raise him from the dead. Even so, it was still an unbelievable thing to do.

When we place ourselves in relation to Christ, or even great figures of faith like the prophet Jeremiah and Rabbi Leo Baeck, we can think of our own efforts as insignificant. But think for a moment of the building in which we are worshipping God today. When James Buchanan Duke and William Preston Few dreamt the dream of Duke University in the early 1920s, they planned a grand Chapel to crown the edifice. Building the West Campus and transforming East Campus was a pretty remarkable thing to do. But building on Duke Chapel didn't begin until 1930, by which time America was plunged into the deepest and most notorious economic depression in its history. No one in 1930 was talking about the depression being simply a passing crisis. It was an overwhelming catastrophe. No one would have been surprised if West Campus had been left incomplete and the building of the Chapel left for another day. But the founders of this university had a dream. At a time when everyone around them had lost all hope, the leaders of this university pressed on and built this Chapel, completing the construction in 1932 and the fine details in 1935. They did it, like Jeremiah, in the belief that the night of doubt and sorrow would not last for ever, and that fields and vineyards, or should I say blue devils and basketballs, would again be exchanged in the land. *It was an unbelievable thing to do.*

They built this Chapel and completed the transformation of this university because they had a dream. And at root I believe their dream was the same dream that Jeremiah had. Because I believe there is one fundamental dream that unites the dream of Jeremiah with the dream of Moses before him and the dream of Daniel and of Joseph of Nazareth after him. And that is, the dream that God will yet bring his children out of exile, out of the place where their sin or the sin of others has placed them, and bring them home – not to the home of nostalgia, not to a rose-tinted vista of motherhood, apple pie, glittering rankings from USA Today and ten consecutive NCAA titles – but to a true home, a home of friendship with God, with the knowledge of what it has taken to get there, and the deeper knowledge that if it cost us something it cost God so much more. Of course the most famous dreamer in recent American history is Dr Martin Luther King jr, and I believe his dream was this same dream, not for the restoration of some imagined past, but for the bringing of the African American people out from the internal exile in which they had walked for so long, and the vital insight that as long as some of her children walked in exile, none of America's people could regard themselves as genuinely at home or call themselves truly free. You don't need me to tell you that Martin Luther King had a dream. And you don't need me to tell you that Martin Luther King did unbelievable things.

But perhaps you do need me to tell you that a number of years ago I had a very painful experience in ministry. I was the pastor of a small and struggling congregation on the edge of a not very glamorous English city. A few short years earlier the diocese had erected a new church building on a housing project where few people had ever been churchgoers. It was a surprising, remarkable, perhaps an unbelievable thing to do. Sadly many local people didn't take well to the new building, and a number of local children took to smashing the windows and even, on occasion, throwing stones at the church members as they left after worship services. Three years after I came to the church things were a little more stable, some of the programs of the church were growing rapidly, and we began to believe we maybe, just possibly, could do unbelievable things. We used some left over money from the building fund to install two stained glass windows on the first floor of the very same building where not four years previously every single window had been broken several times. It felt like Jeremiah buying a field at Anathoth. We were saying, one day all the people of this place will find in this church a blessing, and all the fear and antagonism will be gone. Everyone thought the stained glass windows idea was crazy. It was an unbelievable thing to do. But then some things started to go wrong and one or two of the programs of the church started to unravel and what had been a gathering joy started to feel like a nightmare of human frailty. And I didn't know what to do. So I did what Anglican priests are trained to do – I went to see my bishop.

And my bishop listened gently as I told him the story. And finally he said, “What was the worst thing about it all for you?” And I said, “D’you know what, I think maybe for the first time in my life, I’d dared to dream.” And I wept, there in his study. And the reason for my telling you this story is what he then said. He looked at me tenderly and said “You’re going to need time – but you need to learn to dream again.” I’ve never forgotten those words. “You need to learn to dream again.”

The founding of this university was an unbelievable thing, and it came out of a dream of some people who, like Jeremiah, weren’t going to let others’ lack of faith or imagination stop them from doing unbelievable things. And people have been doing unbelievable things at this university ever since. But this university never has been and never will be a misty-eyed fantasy of perpetual happiness. From time to time it has been through periods of doubt and sorrow, and for quite a number of people the last year or two has been one of those trying periods. But when those heavy clouds gather, we need to remind ourselves that this university began when someone bought a field, and did an unbelievable thing. And so on this Founders’ Sunday I want to say to you, just as someone once said to me, it’s time to learn to dream again. It may take time, but we need to learn to dream again.

Maybe I was wrong to laugh at that trainee youth worker. Maybe he was right about the eleventh commandment. Maybe the eleventh commandment really is “Live the dream.” I laughed because I thought he was talking about an empty fantasy of facile desire or was parroting some kind of cheap advertising slogan. But if the dream is Jeremiah’s dream of a return from exile, if the dream is J.B. Duke and W.P. Few’s dream of faith refined by learning and learning enriched by faith, if the dream in today’s language is one of excellence shaped by goodness and knowledge refined by service, then there’s only one way for those who love this university to inherit the mantle of those who founded it – and that is *to live that dream*. So I say listen to Jeremiah, remember that this university is fundamentally a place where people are called out of different kinds of exile, recall our founders – and *live their dream*. Live it. Don’t just dream it – live it. Live the dream of Jeremiah and King that God will bring the exile to an end. Live the dream of Leo Baeck that not even a Holocaust can quench the fire of God’s love. Live the dream of Duke and Few that goes out and buys a field when all around are full of fear and frailty. Don’t just dream that dream – live that dream. And may Duke continue to be a place where God shapes people like you to do unbelievable things.