

Prophetic investment

The word of the Lord to Jeremiah is to buy a field. In normal times that might be an unremarkable transaction: a simple investment. When someone takes out an investment, it might be with expectation of some benefit in the present; but also with an expectation that it will continue to yield in the future. St. Edmund's has reason to be grateful to the Acle PCC in times past which put some spare money into an investment fund, the yield from which (when the market isn't falling) now serves to reduce our annual operating deficit. One of the things which appeals to me about the proposal to raise the floor of St. Edmund's nave is that it solves the problem now and for the future: unlike a portable ramp or a mechanical lift it would provide level access for all (not just wheelchair users) now and indefinitely: future generations may be grateful for that.

[Another aspect which interests me is future heating needs: the current PCC is not in favour of investigating underfloor heating; but this church is not going to be heated by a gas-fired boiler indefinitely: gas is a fossil fuel which we will (must) move away from; the present boiler will come to the end of its life: I want to ask if the floor can be installed in such a way as to facilitate a change of heating at some point on the future? A future generation might thank us for that as well; but in that case there would be no benefit in the present (but hopefully no great cost either).]

In a similar vein, I'm concerned to keep good burial records, including plans of our churchyards: in doing so, I'm thinking principally of my successors. There have been several instances when, if some of my predecessors had recorded exactly where they buried people, it would have made my job considerably easier.

Moving away from church, grandparents might help their grandchildren financially, looking to secure their future: it no doubt gladdens the grandparent's heart; but the principal beneficiary is the future generation; and that comes at a cost to the giver. More widely, we may feel that the drive to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions is costing us; but if there's to be any hope for future generations, it's an investment we need to make.

Jeremiah's purchase cost him 17 shekels of silver: this is no casual prophetic stunt. But of course, he got a field in return: at Anathoth, 3 miles from Jerusalem. But not a field he can get to: Nebuchadnezzar has Jerusalem under siege; and Jeremiah is shut up in King Zedekiah's prison. He's not going to reap any benefit from the field in the immediate future. In his current predicament, the 17 shekels would probably be more useful. So maybe this is a long-term investment? This is ancestral land: Jeremiah is exercising the right of redemption – similar to the transaction we see towards the end of the book of Ruth. We might think of the 18th century estate owners who commissioned the great landscape designers, expressing confidence in their dynasties by planting avenues and vistas that would never reach maturity in their own lifetime. Is this closer to the meaning of Jeremiah's action? Well, yes and no. The interpretation, in the words of the Lord, is that *houses and fields and vineyards shall [be possessed again] [again be bought] in this land*. But between now and then, if the word of the Lord is to be believed, lies a time of darkness and disruption. And Jeremiah does believe it: it is for proclaiming that the king of Babylon will capture Jerusalem that Zedekiah has imprisoned him. And if Jeremiah believes that, there's no way that any inhabitant of Judah is going to benefit from their landholding, ancestral or not. The Lord directs that the deeds of purchase are placed in *an earthen vessel* (we might think of the Dead Sea scrolls) *that they may be preserved for a long time to come*. When we finally lose touch with Jeremiah, it's on his way, against his will, to exile in Egypt. He never benefits from his holding.

What Jeremiah invested in was a symbol of hope for eventual restoration: *fields and vineyards shall [be possessed again] [again be bought] in this land*. This is no abstract concept: the hope is embodied, earthed in Jeremiah's costly prophetic action. I think of other exiles. Palestinians displaced from their property by the creation and expansion of Israel, I hear, hold on to and pass on their keys: strengthening their identity and, whatever the indications to the contrary, keeping alive their hope of return. I wonder what Ukrainian refugees hold on to in their plight? Jeremiah's action in buying the field doesn't negate the darkness to come; it's not at odds with his prophecy that Jerusalem will fall to Nebuchadnezzar; but reaches beyond it, to uphold those who go into exile and their successors.

As Christians, our thoughts may turn to the resurrection: a hope embodied in Jesus who, at great cost, endured the cross before entering into his kingdom; reaching beyond our experiences of sin, suffering and mortality. Jesus, who [as the offertory sentence frequently reminds us] bade his followers to invest in treasures in heaven, where the earthly benefit is for others, not ourselves.

Our diocesan vision calls us to be prophetic, as well as prayerful and pastoral. That may mean challenging the status quo, as Jeremiah did in maintaining that Zedekiah's resistance was useless and contrary to the word of the Lord. But it also may mean acting in concrete ways for the benefit of people other than ourselves; and for a future we may not live to see. I wonder where that might prompt us to invest ourselves?