

But not yet - 11 Sept 2022.

We have a wooden disc with the figure 2 carved into it, along with the letters, 'it'. It is probably one of the most important items anyone can possibly own, but few are lucky enough to have one. It is an essential piece of kit to have when one has been putting off an important job for some time because it really isn't appealing, or it means getting dirty and smelly. Your wife keeps nagging you about it, and you reassure her that it is high on your list of 'honey-do's' - but you just need to get around to it.

Well, now you have one - and here it is. And now your problem is that you no longer have any excuse for not getting on with the less

than attractive task, even though you know it would be a really good idea.

And this is Israel's problem. As so often happens when Lectionary selections are made, they take passages - often out of context, then sanitize them, robbing them of their impact, and expect us to sit and nod sagely as though we had some idea as to what the hell they were talking about.

What you need to know about this passage from Jeremiah, is that in the preceding chapter, God is accusing Israel, through Jeremiah's prophecy, of being faithless and behaving like a prostitute with other nations gods; and then wailing that God is being harsh

with them when things don't go their way. Remember what we read last week in Jeremiah; that God meets us where He finds us, and if we have been good, then happy things will come to pass; but if we have not, then don't be surprised if the opposite happens.

So Israel promises to come back to the one true God - but they don't. Thus chapter 4 begins with "If you, Israel, will return, then return to me," declares the Lord.

"If you put your detestable idols out of my sight and no longer go astray, and if in a truthful, just, and righteous way you swear, 'As surely as the Lord lives,' then the nations

will invoke blessings by him and in him they will boast."

But of course, Israel does no such thing, so God rouses Nebuchadnezzar from Babylon to invade and capture Israel and Judah - that is the 'scorching wind from the barren heights', as Babylon was ancient Iraq, and the Babylonian empire also captured Syria, which abuts the Golan Heights at the northern extremity of the kingdom of Israel. Not unreasonably, God refers to them as fools.

However, this is a different sort to of 'fool' than that spoken of in Psalm 14, where we have

the words, 'The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'.

(You may not be aware that psalm 14 is identical to psalm 53 - word for word - except for verses 5 and 6. I have not found a satisfactory commentary to tell me why.)

The Hebrew word used for 'fool' here refers to someone who is morally deficient, as opposed to just plain stupid, as is suggested in the Jeremiah passage.

If you wanted to find out why Jeremiah was called the 'Weeping Prophet', then read the whole chapter, but I don't want to stay in the Old Testament any longer. The point that is being made is that Israel needs to make its

deeds match its promises. It needs to find its 'Round Tuit'.

Whenever I turn to Paul's epistles, I have to take a deep breath and try not to get too irritated because of his 'holier than thou' attitude. He gives me the impression of a man who thinks he has already been turned into a saint because of the example he sets and demands of others - even when he's trying to tell us that he's 'the worst of sinners'. It somehow doesn't ring true in my head - but perhaps I'm being overly critical.

But what he does say here is important for two reasons; first - as I have said many times

- 'every saint has a past and every sinner has a future' - which marries up with Paul's statement that 'though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.'

And second, because he says, 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.'

That's of paramount importance because it gives each of us here a chance.

If we look at our gospel, we read in the opening words that, 'the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"

So that means that Jesus is prepared to spend time with each of us. I find that very reassuring.

But I want to tell you about an image I found when I was putting together my Art Gallery for this week; the picture is of a man looking in a mirror, and instead of his reflection, he sees Jesus looking back at him. Now just hold that image in your mind as we consider who or what it is that we are scrubbing our house to find.

Remember too the wonderful psalm that we read last week (139) where we realize that there is nowhere that God isn't - that is the

best - if clunkiest - definition of 'omnipresent', one of God's attributes.

Then, if we want to thread all these beads onto the same necklace, we might reconsider the 'round tuit' that I showed you.

Perhaps cleaning house to find something lost was on your list of jobs to do, and one that you kept putting off until you got around to it - like the Israelites actually doing what they said they would, by stopping worshipping other gods. What are the blocks to your worship? Friends, family, hobbies, food, apathy? Something else, perhaps.

Next consider that any block to our worship is making fools of us, and not just the 'morally deficient' ones that the Hebrew of Psalm 14 implies, but also the plain stupid ones that Jeremiah clearly states.

Move on to Paul's two statements that even though he was a sinner, Jesus showed mercy on him, and that **that** was Jesus' mission on earth - to save sinners.

Finally, look carefully again at the sheep slung around Jesus' shoulders that we had in the Art Gallery this morning; is there something familiar about its face?

Or when you look at your reflection in the mirror, while you're cleaning house looking for something you lost, is it just possible that you see Jesus' face looking back at you, smiling and saying, "There you are, I've been looking for you!"