4 March 2018: Matins
The Third Sunday of Lent
Psalm 119: 25–32; Jeremiah 38: 1-6; Philippians 1: 1–26
The Venerable Martin Gorick, Archdeacon of Oxford

‘So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern, letting him down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud.’

It’s a vivid picture from our first reading. The prophet Jeremiah is in trouble with his King and the court officials and army officers in Jerusalem. The year is 587BC. The city is under siege, and has been for a long time. Jerusalem on a hill top and with its strong walls is well defended. But the siege has been long. The Babylonian force remorseless. Food supplies are exhausted. Even the huge stone water tanks, the cisterns carved out of the city’s bedrock are running dry.

But they are not put to waste. In them are thrown enemies of the state, the so called enemies of the people, like Jeremiah.

Imagine what that must have been like. Lowered through the narrow opening down into the huge dark underground cistern. No longer filled with life giving water, but dank and fetid. The ropes chafing under your armpits as you go down and down until your feet hit the wet mud. It oozes through your toes, over your feet, and up towards your knees as you hit rock bottom. The ropes jerk upwards and disappear into that tiny opening high above you. You are alone. Trapped and abandoned.

It wasn’t the first time for the prophet Jeremiah. His crime was speaking the message. The message he felt he was given by God. A message he felt compelled to give but that nobody wanted to hear. The Message was to give up. To give in. To surrender to Nebuchadnezzar and the huge Babylonian army ranged against them. To put peace above pride. To lose face…but to save life.
It wasn’t a popular message. Words of truth, especially truth spoken to those in power, are seldom welcome. Jeremiah was scaring the horses, he was sapping the resolve of soldiers, he was disturbing the King’s family, he was making everyone doubt the path they were on. The path of resistance, of independence. To doubt that God was with them. Surely a prophet of all people should affirm that God was with them?!

But Jeremiah didn’t do what they wanted. Politicians in all ages like religious leaders when they support their views. But as soon as they don’t you will hear cries that religion and politics shouldn’t mix! It’s been a strange week with former Prime Ministers speaking out against the road we are travelling to Brexit. Like Jeremiah they are vilified and called Enemies of the People, like all those who have spoken out before them. Meanwhile our Prime Minister, who herself campaigned to Remain, leads us resolutely in the opposite direction. Jeremiah in his day felt compelled to say his nation was lost and needed to turn right round and go another way. For this he was thrown into a cistern, and left to die.

Today, as I speak, a young Oxford man is lying in a prison cell in Syria. Jack Letts grew up just down the road from here, going to local schools. He converted to Islam as a teenager and aged just eighteen took himself off to Syria, saying he wanted to help Muslims who were suffering out there. There is no evidence that he ever took up arms, though his actions were undoubtedly foolhardy as well as idealistic. Eventually picked up by Kurdish militia Jack has been held in makeshift prisons ever since, in stifling conditions and usually in solitary confinement. Neither he, nor his parents are receiving any consular help from Britain. Our defence minister has said Britons who have fought abroad should be ‘hunted down and killed’. The policy for people like Jack, who have gone for other reasons, seems to be to forget them and hope the problem will just go away. Like Jeremiah he is both trapped and abandoned. He represents a voice we don’t want to hear.

Or the people of Eastern Ghouta, hiding in underground shelters from constant bombardment. Men, women and children weak and hungry from a siege every bit as harsh as the one Jeremiah knew. Trapped and abandoned.

Or the poor of this country, much closer to home. Visible on our streets in ever increasing numbers. Hidden otherwise behind doors and walls of our overflowing prisons or in rented rooms of overcrowded houses. Like the woman who walked three miles through the snow to a Foodbank in Banbury this week, to get food for herself and her three children. Trapped by circumstance. By officialdom, abandoned.
In our second reading St Paul is writing from prison in Rome. Trapped by the authorities, he will eventually be put to death by them. And yet this intensely personal letter to the church in Philippi is full of joy. Trapped he may be, but somehow in Christ he does not feel abandoned. He knows that people love him, pray for him, write to him. Many people still do the same for those in need today. The churches in central Oxford, with over two hundred volunteers have set up a Winter Night Shelter for the homeless, running seven nights a week, and also run day centres like the Porch and Gatehouse offering longer term support. Many aid agencies seek to support those suffering in war zones, with churches often key places of sanctuary. Most foodbanks were set up with church support, and offer places of some welcome and practical help in lives that can be cold and bleak. Trapped by circumstance perhaps, but not completely abandoned.

Paul was not naïve. He was confident in his deliverance from captivity. But whether that would be through being found innocent by the state in this life, or being vindicated by God after death he did not know. ‘For me living is Christ and dying is gain’. Either way he is with the Lord. Held in chains in prison perhaps, but still with his Lord. Never abandoned.

So as we travel through Lent, as we face our own circumstances that may leave us feeling trapped or even abandoned. As we pray and work for those who face immense suffering and hardship, lets rest in the prayer of St Paul from today’s reading, written from his place of imprisonment,

‘This is my prayer,
that your love may overflow more and more
with knowledge and full insight
to help you to determine what is best.
So that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless,
having produced the harvest of righteousness
that comes through Jesus Christ
for the glory and praise of God.’