Today’s readings illuminate for us a great chasm in our theology.

Jeremiah is giving it large. His theological landscape is common to that of Old Testament, and functionally the same as many Christians and non-Christians today. But they are all mistaken. Let me explain.

For the ancient Hebrews, for many people in the world today:

When life is bad, we are being punished. When life is good, we’re being rewarded. This basic assumption runs right through the Old Testament, and it has a kind of straightforward logic. You can see why people thought and think this way. If you’re good, you’re blessed with victory over enemies, sons and camels – all the things we like. If you’re not blessed with those things, you’ve obviously not pleased God.

As I say, many people think that’s how the world should be. Those questions like, ‘why do bad things happen to good people?’, and vice versa.
Trust in the Lord says Jeremiah and you’ll be like a beautiful tree, well watered. Stray and you’ll be withered like a desert shrub.

But, however tantalisingly straightforward this logic is, it is not so. We know it’s not so because Jesus and our lived experience give us a new perspective.

This Lent we at the Parish Church are being invited to consider our environmental impact. We’ll hear more about this in coming weeks: to give up not chocolate digestives, but give up your carbon footprint for Lent. There can be little doubt that exploiting the gifts of God’s creation is sinful; and that we all do it in various ways: energy use, polluting our air, water and food, where and how we buy and consume things, ab-using our time and mis-using the people around us and online. One, surprisingly simple and easy way to begin to take this sufficiently seriously might be to give up your carbon footprint for Lent. Clearly, it is not a silver bullet. Clearly, it’s an imperfect tool. But it is the beginning of a potentially good and Godly conversation and I hope we’ll all engage with it as we hear more about it. The abuse of God’s wonderful creation in so many ways is anything but fair, and by it we (not God, following on from what we’ve been saying), we are causing untold suffering. So look out for more on this.

But even our care-less-ness is not the cause of all suffering. So what more?

We heard that they came from far and wide, and we with them heard those extraordinary ‘Blessed are’ statements. These teachings turn the simple mechanics of ‘good things happen to good people’ on its head.

Blessed are those who suffer in all kinds of ways, we hear, because God will have the last word and His eternal joys will be theirs. Thomas Hobbs was wrong about lots of things, but for many life is ‘nasty, brutish and short’. Life is not fair. But God, our great God of love, will have the last word - Jesus’ Resurrection shows that. This life (be it good or bad) is but the first note of the first bar of the overture, the opera is to come.

In the meantime, Jesus does not promise that life will be easy or fair. Just that there is hope, and in the meantime that we are never alone. Our Good Shepherd is always with us.

The Christian life is not about imagining a world that seems good to us and then getting cross when it isn’t so. It’s strange how many people don’t believe in God because they would like the world to be different, as if God’s reality was dependent on how we might prefer things to be?

The Christian life, instead, is about trying to live in the real world, the world and the selves we actually find ourselves to be; with as much honesty and curiosity and reason, and love and faith and hope as we can muster together.

We begin with the world we are in. That’s this one. Flawed and frail. Just as flawed and frail as Jeremiah says each of our
own hearts is; our hearts a good microcosm perhaps of a global reality.

And all this is good news. It is good news because we are free to be honest about the world and ourselves being what they actually are, without pretense. And in the same way, we are freed to be honest about the hope we have. We’ll sing in a moment that Jesus will come again and ‘all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well’.

Jesus doesn’t promise us a temporary false fairness, but hope - nothing more and nothing less. The prophet Jeremiah speaks today about our need for ‘trust’. And he was dead right. Trust only comes through real relationship, through the experience of doing life together. That is exactly what we need to do. Perhaps it’s something to especially consider as we saunter towards Lent? Do I trust God? That is to say, do I have a relationship with God that is actually a real relationship, that has something real and substantial about it? In which trust can grow?

Our part is not to wish for lesser and brutal schemes of good and bad. Or alternative worlds we wish God would make real. The game is to live a real life, and that means having a relationship with God that is real. That, when our time is done, death will be but a speed bump in the road and that greater relationship of us and God which we have begun will carry on towards the ‘sweet and blessed country’ He has lovingly prepared.