

Tatjana Ljujić, *Beware of False Prophets*

10th August 2025

8th Sunday after Trinity

Romans 8.12-17

Matthew 7.15-21

Not long ago, on my way to meet Bishop Neil in preparation for my ordination, I found myself in conversation with a taxi driver. When he heard that I was about to become a minister in the Church of England, he smiled and said something like: 'Good on you. Nice to see an immigrant taking on the English faith for a change. Usually it's the other way round these days. This country's turning Muslim.'

He meant it as a compliment. This soon-to-be deacon, however — you won't be surprised to hear — found the underlying assumption deeply troubling: the idea that Christianity is a cultural possession, something to be guarded from outsiders; that to be Christian is to assume a particular identity, one that is national, inherited, and under threat.

And it wasn't that this was an 'extreme' position that worried me, but that it was perfectly ordinary. That fear — the narrowing of Christian identity into something defensive and tribal — is woven into our everyday conversations, our politics, and across print, broadcast, and social media.

I asked the taxi driver which church he attended, and he said he wasn't 'really religious'. He was clearly not mourning the loss of faith, or Church life for that matter, but the erosion of tradition — a decline he blamed not on the Church or those who drifted away from it, but on newcomers of different faiths.

There is nothing inherently wrong with being attached to a tradition, or with wanting to preserve something you see as a marker of national identity — even if it is no longer of personal relevance to you. What is troubling, however, is that this nostalgia for a 'Christian England' — the loss of which is so often blamed on

immigrants — frequently goes hand in hand with a politics that stands in stark contrast to the Gospel's teaching on hospitality, love of neighbour, and care for those in need. Perhaps even more concerning is that some who publicly advocate such politics also present themselves as defenders of Christianity.

'Beware of false prophets', Jesus warns in today's Gospel reading — those who 'come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravening wolves.' Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord', not all who claim a Christian identity, are doing 'the will of [God] the Father'. The real test, he says, is not rhetoric or tradition, but fruit: 'By their fruits ye shall know them.'

So what is that fruit?

It's what our words and actions produce — in ourselves, in others, in communities. Does our teaching draw people towards love, or drive them into fear, or worse, violence? Does it serve to build up a cohesive society, or does it sow division between communities?

And this is not simply about singling out people in the public eye or those in positions of influence. It is about examining our own faith. It asks us to look beyond appearances — beyond tradition, reputation, and heritage — and ask: what is our faith producing? What are the fruits of our Christian identity? Are we clothing the naked? Are we feeding the hungry? Or are we, through the choices we make to secure our own interests or those of our immediate tribe, helping to perpetuate our neighbour's misfortune?

This same call to self-examination runs through the passage from Paul's Epistle to the Romans we read this morning. When Paul speaks of life in the flesh and life in the Spirit, he isn't contrasting body and soul — he's contrasting two ways of living: one shaped by fear and self-protection, the other by trust and service. The 'flesh' clings to control, closes itself off in suspicion, and seeks safety in dominance. But Paul reminds us that we are not bound by that way of life. We've received something entirely different.

'[We] have received the Spirit of adoption.' A Spirit that cries 'Abba! Father!' — not because we've deserved it, but because God is a gracious parent. And since we've received the unearned gift, to consider our neighbours deserving or underserving of our own giving is a contradiction of that very gift — a denial of the grace by which we ourselves live.

And that's why fruit matters. Because it reveals what truly comes from the Spirit. When Christian identity is used to defend comfort instead of challenge, borders instead of bridges, it has stopped bearing Gospel fruit.

Jesus said, 'Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom, but only the one who does the will of my Father.'

That's a hard word. But it's also a liberating one. Because it reminds us that we're not called to protect Christianity. We're called to live it. We're not called to guard some national or cultural version of the faith. We're called to be conformed to Christ.

And discerning whether we are led by the Spirit means looking at the fruit.

Are we becoming more merciful? More generous with others, and less self-centred? Do our lives reflect the welcome we ourselves have received — not earned, but gifted by grace? Are we willing to speak up — even when it's uncomfortable — when we see faith being distorted into something unrecognisable?

We are not debtors to fear. We are not bound to suspicion. We have received the Spirit — the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead — and that Spirit now lives in us. And if we listen, if we allow ourselves to be led, we will bear fruit. Fruit that liberates, not controls. That heals, not shames. That welcomes, not excludes.

So I return to that taxi conversation and the assumption that Christianity needs protecting from the immigrants — when in fact, the gospel tells us that we were

all strangers once. That we are all adopted. That we are all being drawn into a family we didn't build for ourselves.

We are not called to carry crosses in defence of borders. We are called to take up the cross and follow Christ.

So may we resist the voices that use religion to justify fear.

May we grow in discernment, rooted in the Spirit of adoption.

And may our lives bear the fruit that witnesses — truthfully and courageously — to the God who calls us children, welcomes the stranger, and tears down walls.

Amen.