

Sermon on Sunday 3 March 2021

by Rev. Wendy Sellers

Reading: Jeremiah 8.18 - 9.11

This Lent, there are quite a few readings in the Lectionary from the book of Jeremiah, including the one we've just heard. And I realised that I didn't know much about him, and that the extracts of scripture I was reading weren't helping, so I've done some research and I hope it helps you, too.

Jeremiah was a prophet. Now, prophets are generally divided into major prophets and minor prophets: depending on how much we know about them, how much of their message has survived and their impact on the Jewish people. But, to sum up, minor prophets tend to have short books.

Jeremiah is a major prophet. We know far more about his life than probably any other prophet. His book is 54 chapters long, and he's generally credited with the books of Kings and Lamentations as well, making him a significant author in both Jewish and Christian scripture. His prophecies cover one of the most important periods of ancient Jewish history – the time leading up to the invasion of Israel by Babylon, the sacking of the temple in Jerusalem and the capture of many Jews who were transported to Babylon itself, an exile that lasted 70 years.

Jeremiah was a priest from Jerusalem and his message for his people was that they were breaking their covenant with God, to the extent that God would use one of their enemies, Babylon, to bring judgement down on them. God also called Jeremiah to be a prophet to 'the nations' beyond the borders of his own people. Mighty Babylon didn't just have its sights set on Israel. Unfortunately, the nations were no more inclined to listen to him than his home country.

Jeremiah pointed out that the Jews practiced their faith inside the temple but did not live out that faith in their everyday lives. He told them this would result in disaster, specifically invasion by Babylon. He lived through the siege and destruction of Jerusalem with them, eventually watching his people carried away into exile.

Unusually for Biblical writing, we can be pretty sure we are reading Jeremiah's own words much of the time, because he dictated them to a scribe called Baruch, and as a result we have his sermons, poems and essays to read today. Baruch also gathered lots of stories about Jeremiah and linked all the pieces together, and so the book reads as a coherent anthology of writing by and about the prophet.

Jeremiah is commonly called the 'weeping prophet'. This is a little unfair. Firstly, there are no 'jolly' prophets. Their job was always to speak out into times of impending crisis, both spiritual and social. They are all 'weeping' prophets. But secondly, Jeremiah's message was not one of unalloyed doom and gloom. Although he tells the Israelites that God's judgement will fall on them, he also preaches a message of hope and grace. His calling was to tell them that God would uproot and tear down, but also plant and build up.



Let's think of the Book of Jeremiah as a Victoria sponge sandwich. I apologise to anyone who has given up cake for Lent. So, we have a layer of sponge, then cream and jam, then more sponge, then finally a dusting of icing sugar on top.

The first layer of sponge of about 30 chapters contains warnings about the consequences of violating the Torah; most especially worshipping other Gods, the corruption of leaders and the rampant social injustice against the most vulnerable.

The jam and cream layer of chapters 30-33 is where most of the hope lies. Jeremiah tells the people that God will not abandon them, and indeed will renew the covenant, transforming them from within. The words of the Torah will come to be inscribed on their hearts instead of tablets of stone. One day they will be healed and return home. The Messiah from the line of David will come and God will at last be recognised as the one true God by all the nations.

The second layer of sponge tells how Babylon arrives and after a siege Jerusalem falls. The temple is robbed of its treasures and burned to the ground. Many are killed and thousands sent into exile in Babylon. It also contains a series of poems on God's judgement: not just on Israel, but on the surrounding nations and finally on Babylon itself. All will eventually be judged by God.

So, we have the thick layer of dire prophesy, a thin layer of hope and then another layer of dire prophesy.

The final surprising dusting of icing sugar comes at the very end of the book, when the king of Babylon releases the Israelite king from imprisonment and invites him to eat at the royal table for the rest of his life, a sign of hope that things will eventually improve and the Israelites be set free.

So, what can we learn from the book of Jeremiah?

I see it as a huge lesson in how God can use anyone for his purposes – even, it seems, the enemy and the unbeliever. God can use even the most unlikely circumstances to produce growth.

This book reminds us constantly that actions have consequences and that those consequences can be severe.

But, most of all, we are reminded that God's specialist subject is rebuilding and replanting. He offers us hope even in the

darkest times. And that hope is intended for everyone. For all the nations.

In the midst of that terrible time, God gave these words to Jeremiah to pass on to his people - then and for all time: 'You shall be my people and I will be your God'.

They are some of my favourite words in the Bible. Words of hope, forged in pain and despair. Words that tell us we are never alone or unwanted, because we belong to God.

'You shall be my people and I will be your God.'

Words that speak of a time when God's kingdom will finally be realised.

'You shall be my people and I will be your God.'