

Sermon 11th September 2022

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 and Luke 15:1-10.

The purpose of a sermon is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, I always try to attempt this but.. on my goodness how on earth does a preacher find the good news in a passage like the one we heard today from Jeremiah. Rather than force this difficult piece of scripture to provide good news we are going to look at it as an example of how to read the Bible in the light of Jesus and his gospel.

Today's extract from Jeremiah, indeed any extract from the Bible should never be read in isolation. It is a good practice to always skim both the preceding chapters and the ones following. This gives us an idea of what is going on and helps situate the reading within the bigger picture. At times it is also necessary to read a little bit about the historical background of a text. This is the definitely the case for Jeremiah.

Poor Jeremiah, known as the weeping prophet, this tender-hearted man was called by God to warn the people of Judah about impending disaster. If they did not repent, if they did not turn back to God, they would face devastation. So what was going on both politically and spiritually in Jeremiah's time, you may wonder, why are the people given such a dire prophecy? At the beginning of Jeremiah's vocation the people are beginning to get too big for their boots, so to speak, they are ignoring God's commands, worshipping idols and because of their pride and self-reliance they begin ignoring the demands of their powerful neighbour to the north, the Babylonians. Instead of paying the Babylonians tribute, God's people revolted against this superpower and as a result brought upon themselves devastating consequences. Judah was basically wiped out, the temple destroyed and the brightest and best taken away to exile in Babylon.

I wonder if being known as God's own people. the chosen ones, and having a long history with the God known as I Am, the one and only, had given the people a false sense of pride and security, a kind of "we'll be right" attitude, God's on our side, what can possibly harm us? They had forgotten that being called and chosen by God is never solely for our own benefit, they had forgotten that God had called them to be a light to the nations, not to become a supnation, not to become rich and powerful, simply to give witness to the one and only God.

The nature of God in today's text from Jeremiah is troubling, and we may well ask where is the God of mercy, forgiveness, and grace? It seems that God who has granted human beings free will, also allows us to make our own mistakes and suffer the consequences and along the way we hopefully learn something.

God's people felt alone and desolate away from their homeland however they did learn a valuable lesson during their time of exile in Babylon. Even though they had lost everything and could no longer worship God in the temple they began to realise that God was still with them. God was with them in their suffering and despite the grim outlook, despite sixty years in exile God did not give up on them. God's plan to restore and reconcile all people, of all nations to Godself did not die in exile. We know this because from the tribe of Judah, will arise the Lion of Judah, Jesus of Nazareth.

God allows us free will, God doesn't keep us tied up in reins, or control us like a puppet master with strings, we are free to suffer the consequences of our actions. (Climate Change). The best outcome is that through suffering we learn more about ourselves and more about who God is. Now, it would never be right to say God brings suffering to our door and in light of the constant tragedies around the world and close to home that kind of theology is wrong and repulsive, yet knowing God is with us in times of suffering, and never gives up on us is reassuring. Suffering can be a pathway to knowing God more intimately even though at times we will want to push God away, or blame God for the things we must go through. God patiently wears that.

In today's reading from Luke, Jesus reveals to us God's patient nature and yearning heart for all people to turn to him. In the context of Luke's gospel, Jesus is eating with sinners, people who are at the lower end of society and therefore regarded as less moral, less pure, and less righteous. These are the ones God yearns for. God longs to draw people who are lost, who are grieving, who are struggling with addictions or illness, people who have no hope, people who don't fit in, people who have suffered, which means everyone who has ever lived, into God's divine embrace. God never gives up on us. All of heaven rejoices, the angels dance and joy abounds when we are found.

Amen.