

1. No pretence

Reading: Jeremiah 3:1, 11-22; 4:1-4

Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts

1. In the next weeks we will be focusing on the prophet Jeremiah. If I had to pick one prophetic book to read, his would be my choice, for various reasons. The most important reason is his wonderful grasp of God's true character.

First, some background: Jeremiah was from a priestly family, but he was, first and foremost, a prophet. What is a prophet? A person handy with a crystal ball you consult to predict the future? No. A prophet is someone so in touch with God that he or she can discern how God is affected by what he sees and hears in the world. And, because of this, a prophet has a good idea of where God is heading with the world. The essence of prophecy is not predicting the future, but knowing God – not simply knowing things about God, but knowing how God's heart beats. And because he knows what God is like, a prophet can look at the world from God's perspective. If knowing how God's heart beats is the major quality of a prophet, Jeremiah was an exceptional prophet.

Earlier this year, we pointed to the five-fold ministry of the church. We saw that there are five basic gifts that God uses in a church to equip it and steer it towards health and maturity. Both Grant and I stated that every Christian has a bit of each of the five types of ministry in our make-up. One of these five gifts is prophecy. If prophecy were predicting the future, I would find it hard to defend a statement like that. But if prophecy is knowing God well enough to be able to imagine how he would shape the future, it becomes a very different thing. And so, let's learn from Jeremiah for our own prophetic ministry. Let's stand next to him as he looks at the world from God's point of view in the coming weeks and let's learn from him about God's response to what he sees and hears.

2. Jeremiah has an interesting family story. He comes from a priestly family from Anathoth. His ancestors used to be influential priests in the temple in Jerusalem, but were banished to Anathoth, out in the sticks, by King Solomon. Solomon was not the rightful heir to the throne of Israel. His brother Adonijah was the first in the line of succession. In 1 Kings 2 we find the story of how Jeremiah's ancestor Abiathar was banished to Anathoth for having backed Adonijah. And so, this line of priests was relegated to the margins of power. They were outsiders. So much so, that when the Babylonians removed all the important and influential people from Jerusalem, they did not think of Jeremiah as someone worth taking. He was an outsider, marginal. But this gave him the freedom to see things in Judah from a different perspective to those in power.

This is important, since the time of Jeremiah was a time of huge political upheavals and power struggles. The rise of the Babylonian empire in the northeast threatened the existence of Judah. To the south there was another political power: Egypt. Israel was uncomfortably situated in the firing line of both these superpowers. Jerusalem was a hotbed of conflicting political groups, each with its own idea of how they could create a future for God's people. If there had been

newspapers and television in those days, each would have had their own paper and news channel, propagating their take on current affairs. Politics was a mess.

Religion was a mess as well. King Josiah of Judah had instituted huge reforms in Judah after the discovery of an early edition of the book of Deuteronomy where it had been left unread in the temple in Jerusalem. There was an overlap between King Josiah's last years and the start of Jeremiah's time as a prophet and it seems certain that Jeremiah shared the vision of religious reform that Josiah had. Unfortunately, after Josiah's death, the people of Judah lapsed into a state of superficial religiosity that turned the temple and the priests into an institute that served the interests of the powerful and well-to-do in Jerusalem. Prayers were still offered and sacrifices brought, but not out of loyalty to God. There were even false prophets delivering "prophecies" to please the powerful.

The one person who seemed to be unaffected by it all was this amazing man, who looked not from the perspective of one of the factions vying for power, but from God's perspective. The fact that he was an outsider helped him not to be hijacked by one of these groups, as many of the priests and false prophets were. The major source of Jeremiah's clear view on things and his ability to go against the stream of opinions was his close relationship with God and his conviction of his calling as a prophet. Next Sunday, Grant will tell us more about this. Let's turn our attention to the picture of God that Jeremiah paints.

3. When Jeremiah speaks about God, he speaks about a God who cares deeply and is affected by all that occurs in his creation. God becomes personally involved with the world. He is a passionate God, a God for whom relationships are of paramount importance. All of the language Jeremiah uses is relational language, not merely the language of the courtroom that speaks about right and wrong, about rules kept or broken. Yes, the people of God have transgressed. Yes, they have broken law upon law upon law. But this is not a court case. This is the kind of language you would expect to hear in a marriage therapist's room where one person articulates painful experiences of rejection. Throughout the prophecies of Jeremiah, we are given access to the pain and joy and anger and deepest longings of God. Six centuries after Jeremiah, this depiction of God becomes visible to the human eye in Jesus Christ, who suffers for the sake of his beloved people on the cross.

In our reading for today, Jeremiah uses a powerful metaphor to aid us in seeing things from the perspective of God. God is like a man whose wife betrays him and prostitutes herself to many lovers. God suffers the emotions that a man in this position would. The unfaithful wife, obviously, portrays Judah. The many lovers are the false gods and the alliances with worldly powers. The question now arises: What should the man do if his wife returns to him and wants their marriage to resume? Deuteronomy 24:1-4 speaks to exactly this scenario. The law does not allow a resumption of the marriage. The unfaithfulness of the woman is described as an impurity that poisons society. Sin was viewed by the people of God as something like Covid – life-threatening and infectious.

But Jeremiah relays God's surprising response. God makes the humiliating choice of promising to take back his unfaithful people if they would only return to him. God's grief about his unfaithful people sometimes turns to anger and indignation, but it never erases the longing for them. This is what makes restoring the relationship possible. This is what Jeremiah pleads for. Over and over in our reading we get the call to return to God: *Return, return, return*, we hear.

Returning is not something we can do superficially. It involves confession of sin, made from the heart. It cannot be done with pretence, as a mumbled apology. To make this point, Jeremiah shocks the people of Judah by saying that Israel is more faithful than Judah. Here is why it is shocking: Three hundred years before, Israel (the ten northern tribes) and Judah (including the tribe of Benjamin) had split into two kingdoms. By this time, their faith had been tainted by the religions of a number of other nations. The people of Judah looked down on these Samaritans (Samaria was their capital) as incurably wayward, while they, themselves, were the true torchbearers of God's people. But in verse 12, God is quoted as saying that he prefers the faith of Israel, misguided as it is, to that of Judah, since Judah's faith is superficial and shallow, with no real commitment to God – nothing more than pretence. They have even lost the ability to blush about their sins! They are wearing masks when they approach God – masks that hide their true feelings. In spite of this, God is willing to extend his passionate invitation: "Return to me!" But this can only work if Judah returns with true remorse. Do not only do an outward circumcision, the Lord says; circumcise your hearts! What God desires is an open and close relationship with his children with no room for playacting and pretence.

This is an incredible offer. This is something we could never expect God to do. He should have just ditched Judah and called another individual with faith like Abraham or Moses and started over. How about Jeremiah? But this is not what God is like. Even when we are at our worst, God yearns to heal the broken relationship and calls on us to return. And when we do, he receives us back with the joy of the father of the prodigal son. And our lives are changed forever.

4. A number of years ago a colleague of mine and I ran an evening service for young adults. We did a series on Jeremiah and started with this same passage, quoting a number of other passages also, to demonstrate how God is a God who is deeply affected by what we do and how we act towards him. In church that evening was a young man who had visited friends who were regulars in the young adult service, and who had invited him along. As he listened to the sermon, he got more and more irritated by the image of God we were setting up from Jeremiah. We ended the service with a challenge to the young adults, which most of them took up: Read through Jeremiah in the coming weeks with a coloured marker in your hand and highlight all the emotions ascribed to God. See how that colours your image of God. All of this was anathema for this very macho young man. When he got home, he sat down at his computer and started to write a scathing email to me and my colleague. It started out something like this: "My God is not like this..." He then continued to contrast his God with the version we had put forward. His God gave second chances, but then you had no excuses if you failed again. His God did not waste his time on feeble emotions, but was rock-steady in the face of our misdeeds. His God was unscrupulously fair and clear on what the rules were. If you transgressed them, you had to bear the consequences. He decided not to send his email to me and my colleague immediately, but to attend a few more of the services to collect some more ammunition to really blast us out of the water. Somewhere along the line, he also decided to take up our challenge to read through Jeremiah with a highlighter. Doing this blew his mind. After attending the whole of the series (a long one) he did send us an email. In it he gave his description of his God, but concluded with a stirring admission: "I have come to realise that this is not God; this was my father! This is how he acted. And the God I am now getting to know is changing me irrevocably. I am less harsh to people at work who have to report to me. I am more sympathetic to others. I don't know where this will end, but I am going on this journey willingly..."

A GOD WHO CARES DEEPLY

Here is my challenge. Take a marker and do this while reading through the book of Jeremiah in these coming weeks and come to grips with the way God responds to our world and to how we serve him. See how that impacts on the way you experience God, how you respond to God.

We, like the people of God in the time of Jeremiah, are in a time in which we face great challenges – challenges we can only meet if we are firmly anchored in our relationship to God. I don't have to be much of a prophet to tell you that when that is the case, we will be able to go forward into the future with great assurance.

Amen.

*Rev. Dr Breda Ludik
18 June 2023*

2. Being Fully Human

Jeremiah 1; 2:5; 13:17

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart...*

Let's remind ourselves of the historical setting.

After Solomon's death circa 920, Israel was divided into two kingdoms: the northern and the southern. The northern kingdom was called Israel – also known as Ephraim. It was made up of ten tribes, and its capital was Samaria. In 722, the Assyrians conquered Israel, took its capital city, and scattered the people, who were, essentially, never to return.

The southern kingdom was known as Judah. It was made up of two tribes (Judah and Benjamin), and its capital was Jerusalem. Judah was left relatively untouched while the northern kingdom was dismantled – until the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Babylonians in 587, with the subsequent exile of Jews to Babylon. Unlike the northern kingdom, these people did return to their land.

The Lord called Jeremiah in 627 or 626, approximately 100 years after the fall of the northern kingdom. Jeremiah was between 17 and 20 years old.

In the intervening years between the fall of the northern kingdom and Jeremiah's call, the Assyrian empire collapsed through infighting and civil war, and the surrounding superpowers, the Egyptians and the Babylonians, went head to head to fill this political vacuum.

Jeremiah therefore starts his ministry with the Babylonians and Egyptians fighting it out, and Judah, with its capital city of Jerusalem, caught in the middle, not sure which side to back. He ends his ministry about 40 years later, with the Babylonians becoming the major power in the region, taking Judah into exile and destroying the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jeremiah was from Anathoth, three miles or so northeast of Jerusalem.

Last week, Breda reminded us that there are five basic gifts that God uses in a church to equip it and steer it towards health and maturity, and that every Christian has a bit of each of the five types of ministry in their make-up - including the gift of being a prophet.

We saw that a **prophet** is so in touch with God that he or she can discern how God is affected by what he sees and hears in the world. And because of this, a prophet has a good idea of where God is heading with the world. The essence of prophecy is not predicting the future but knowing God. Not simply knowing things about God but knowing how God's heart beats. And because a prophet knows what God is like, a prophet sees the world from God's perspective.

When Jeremiah speaks about God, he speaks about a God who cares deeply and is affected by all that occurs in his creation... a God who becomes personally involved with the world.

A GOD WHO CARES DEEPLY

He is a passionate God, a God for whom relationships are of paramount importance. The language Jeremiah uses of God is also relational language. It's not just the language of the courtroom, which only speaks of right and wrong, where everything is black and white, and where rules are either kept or broken.

Through Jeremiah we learn of a God who is not distant, a God who cares, who feels, who is passionate, who is emotional.

Breda encouraged us to take a marker and highlight all the emotions attributed to God in this book of Jeremiah, and then to explore how that impacts on our own experience of God, and on how we respond to God.

Last week we started in Jeremiah chapter 3. We saw God heartbroken as his people rejected him, having not learnt the lessons of the northern kingdom. The language God uses of Judah, a nation turning away from God, is the language of unfaithfulness, of promiscuity, of prostitution, of a woman not just having one extramarital affair, but many!

We did not hear the language of the divorce courts where there is to be no restoration of the broken relationship as demanded by Levitical law and Deuteronomic law. Instead, we saw God pleading: '*Return, return, return!*'

Why did we start with Chapter 3? To get right into understanding God's pain, and God's longing for his people to come back to him. God is heartbroken with his people's promiscuity, their worship of everything and anything else but God, their desire to be dependent on other nations for security, and their practice even of child sacrifice.

This was not the way it was supposed to be between Yahweh and his people!

So have you got your marker handy? Let's look at a few examples of passages and the insight they give us into God's emotions.

- **Chapter 13:17** gives us more insight into God's emotional response to the consequences his people suffer for not returning to him:

*I will **weep** in secret
because of your pride;
my eyes will **weep bitterly**,
overflowing with tears,
because the Lord's flock will be taken captive.*

It's breaking God's heart that punishment must come for their persistent, flagrant disregard for him – punishment that he himself has to inflict on them. (*See also the boiling pot vision that Jeremiah saw in Jeremiah 1:13-16*).

- We also note God's **bewilderment** over their actions, when he asks in 2:5, '*What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me?*' – followed by the consequence to them of replacing God in their lives: '*They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.*'

A GOD WHO CARES DEEPLY

That's quite a statement – and a far cry from Psalm 8:4-5:

*What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?
You have made them a little lower than the angels
and crowned them with glory and honour.*

Sadly, this is a comment that stands the test of time across the millennia. It is equally true for our generation as it was in the 7th and 8^h century BC.

But **worthless** is not what being human is all about. That's not how I want to be remembered. It's the opposite of Matthew 25:23, '*Well done, good and faithful servant!*' Nor is 'worthless' what God wants. And so we hear his words, appealing, imploring his people, to **return, return, return**.

God wants people to see the world as He sees it... to be his voice, his hands, his feet.

God uses prophets, like he used Jeremiah, and he wants to use you.

We only need to look at the news: wars, poverty, famine, and the list goes on: injustice, environmental disaster... to see the consequences of people turning away from God, of worshipping false gods.

Centuries ago, the word *vocation*, meaning literally 'a calling', applied only to bishops, priests, and monks – those occupying offices within the hierarchy of the church. It was believed that the clergy had been called by God. They alone had a vocation. Everyone else just worked!

The idea dates back to Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century. He wrote that Christ had established two ways of life: the 'perfect life' and the 'permitted life'. The perfect life was the one God called the clergy to: a life of prayer, worship, and service to Christ through the church. The labour of everyone else, including farmers, artists, merchants, homemakers, who were 'also rans', was concerned with the things of earth, while the clergy were occupied with the things of heaven!

This view of calling essentially went unchallenged for the next 1200 years until the Protestant Reformation when the reformers said there was no basis for this dichotomy.

I suspect there are remnants of Eusebius' view of calling in our DNA. We can still be guilty of thinking today that there are only a few people who are 'called'. Missionaries are called to share the gospel with those who have never heard it. Pastors/ ministers are called to care for and to serve the church. What about the farmer, the teacher, the plumber, the bin man, the stay-at-home parent, the carer? I suggest that everything we do as a disciple of Jesus should be spiritual – **every activity...!**

You may find it helpful to think of calling as having three levels, in this way:

- First, a follower of Jesus is called to be in (and remain in) relationship and communion with Christ. Anything else implies that we are chasing after false gods

and on a slippery slope. Ultimately, we face the potential epitaph of 'Worthless', rather than 'Good and faithful servant'.

- Second, all Jesus' followers share a set of common callings. These are the many commands of Scripture that apply to all of God's children in every time and place. They are summed up in Mark 12:30-31: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.... Love your neighbour as yourself.*
- Third, each Jesus follower has a specific calling that God directs him or her to accomplish, as in Jeremiah 1:5,

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a*

God may not be calling you to be a prophet to the nations but ... What is it for you?

This passage is for everyone, from the children who are 'too young to lead' to our elderly members who can fall into the trap of thinking they have nothing left to offer. We have all been called by God, just as uniquely as Jeremiah was, even if we have never audibly heard God's voice calling us to be a prophet.

So, of course, the question we are all asking is 'What is God calling me to?'

I don't have the answer for you, but the theologian Frederick Buechner is helpful here:

The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

Breda paraphrases this as: 'Let your joy lead you to the place God has called you, where you find energy, and God will meet you there'.

And this calling may change over the years.

As I have said before, there is no such thing as retirement in God's service! Do not let anyone tell you that you are unqualified for your calling. You are not too young, too old, too inexperienced, or with too little formal education to be used by God.

The great paradox of being human is that we are both absolutely unqualified and the exact right person for the calling that God has placed on our lives. We are qualified because God has called us.

Winters in Israel can be quite dreary and wet. Parts of the country are mountainous, so the days can also be very cold. But in the middle of winter, the dreariness, and the cold, God gives a sign of hope that new life is around the corner: the equivalent of our snow drop! In Israel, it's the almond tree. Almond trees are the first tree to blossom and the last to bear fruit.

A GOD WHO CARES DEEPLY

Jeremiah's first vision (1:11,12) uses a play on words that carried a vital truth back then, as well as for us today.

The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?"

"I see the branch of an almond tree," I replied.

¹² The LORD said to me, "You have seen correctly, for I am watching^[b] to see that my word is fulfilled."

The Hebrew word for almond ('shaked') is also translated as 'to watch'. By using the example of the almond branch, God is assuring Jeremiah that He is watching over His word to bring it to pass, no matter the passage of time. It's not always going to be winter for God's people.

When we look at the news on TV, in the media, and on social platforms, it's depressing. It's like winter! Last Saturday's far-right meeting in Elgin town centre was another cold spell. On a more personal level, you may be in a season that feels emotionally, relationally, or spiritually like winter. *But spring is coming.* Hold onto God's promises. He has prepared a good future for those who love Him.

Our prophetic ministry is to see our world through God's eyes – to see how human behaviours affect God, what these behaviours do to God, how our behaviour can bring joy, and how it can also distress him.

We are to challenge society, challenge thinking. We are motivated, or 'called' if you like, to action – not from some moralism, not from self-righteousness – but because we feel God's passion to become the hands and feet of God – and, yes, the voice of God.

What are we to do? In Jeremiah 1:10 we see six verbs that are applicable to us all:

To uproot
and tear down
To destroy
and overthrow
To build
and to plant

We may be called to be as overt a prophet as Jeremiah, or maybe less so!

Are you called to pull down any walls of legislation, designed to keep us safe but which in fact may do the opposite?

Are you called to destroy your pride and envy and hatred?

Are you called to build up a friend's confidence when they are down?

Are you called to plant trees that capture carbon from our atmosphere or seeds of peace?

The challenges to us this morning are to consider our prophetic ministry, to know God, to know God loves us, to get to know how He sees the world, how he views his creation, to get to know his passion, feel his passion and to become motivated by it.

A GOD WHO CARES DEEPLY

Each of us is also challenged to find out what energises us, to discern where we can be the voice, the hands and feet of God, so we can do the work He has called us to do.

Do not be terrified: God loves you. He is with you. *Yada, yada, yada*¹

May we all know what being in relationship with God means, and what it means to be fully human – to be whom He made us to be.

Amen

Lord God,

*Help us to see the world as you see it,
in all its beauty and in all its brokenness.*

May we be not overwhelmed.

May we be open to your calling,

where we find our energy and our joy in your service...

to be your voice, your hands, your feet

in the work you call us to in the days, weeks, months, and years ahead.

May we be equipped, and give us the courage and discernment

to pluck up and pull down,

to destroy and overthrow,

to build up and to plant

as You direct.

Amen

Grant Cumming

25 June 2023

¹ *Yada* refers to a deep knowledge that is Godly knowledge. *Yada* is not only the knowledge of God; it's also knowing God.

3. Remember me

Jeremiah 2:1-13 and 32

*“Does a young woman forget her jewelry, a bride her wedding ornaments?
Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number.”*

1. What is the worst sin anyone could commit? I have heard it said about someone who has done something particularly heinous, “There will be an especially hot spot in hell reserved for him.” So, what are the sins that deserve worse punishment than others? Brutal violence? Injustice against vulnerable people? Sexual sins? Here is what I think: The question posed is not the right one. It should be, Which sin causes God most pain? Sin is not merely breaking the rules, with some of the offences carrying harsher penalties than others. Sin is doing something that is at odds with God’s good order of things in the world and the gracious will of God for all who live in his creation. Therefore, sin damages the world and this causes God to grieve.

Jeremiah understood this. He spoke out against a number of sins, but the basis for all sin is simply forgetting God. God is at the centre of all Jeremiah takes into account, not the rules. This is so because God is a God who cares deeply about relationships and God made the world to function as a network of relationships. God is *someone*, not *something* – not a kind of impersonal force, or artificial intelligence with which you can have a whole conversation, but not a relationship. Forgetting God displays our lack of commitment to our relationship with him. It is like forgetting your wife’s or husband’s birthday, if you are married – only much worse. It is like forgetting your wedding anniversary – only much, much worse. It is, in fact, like forgetting you are even married. Jeremiah says this in verse 32: *“Does a young woman forget her jewellery, a bride her wedding ornaments? Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number.”*

2. Here is the thing: God does not forget. He treasures his relationship with every one of us. He remembers all the good times with us. Jeremiah 2 starts with God wistfully speaking of his relationship with his people in the past, almost like paging through a family album and reliving the moments in the pictures: *“I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness...”* God remembers the time of the desert wanderings, when his relationship with his people was young and fresh (apart from some hiccups!) and he uses the language of a marriage relationship. The people were God’s young bride; he was their young husband. You sense a longing in God for things to be like that again. But they have strayed, forgotten what it was like... forgotten God in a very real sense. And so, God is a bit stunned and says, *“What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me?”* This is not what we would have expected. When you read through Jeremiah, you get an idea of the sheer magnitude of Israel’s infidelity to God. Society had become inhospitable to those not connected to the ones in power. Politics was a matter of scheming and conniving. Economics was a free-for-all with those who had little becoming the helpless prey of those with power and money. Everyone was looking after themselves to the detriment of others. We would have expected God, after reviewing what he had done for his people in the past, to explode in anger and saying, “How dare you!” Instead, we find the wistful, *“What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me?”* This moves me more than I can say.

3. The second thing that strikes me about God's response to the people's forgetfulness is that he is still concerned for them. God points out what ill effects this has for his people. Even in his hurtful state of mind, he cares deeply about their plight. The first thing forgetting God does is to lead to substitute gods – idolatry. They say that nature abhors a vacuum. The moment a vacuum appears in nature, it draws in something else to fill it. Nature abhors a vacuum. Religion does, too! If we stop worshipping God, we soon find something else to worship. That is simply the way we are wired. But when we turn our backs on God, we worship useless idols. In our day it might not be other gods in the literal sense, but we turn to money, the adulation of others, power, etc. to fill the vacuum where God used to be. None of these could ever compare with God. They are rightly described by God when he says, "*They followed worthless idols...*" These idols cannot take care of you, the way God does. They cannot protect you. They are, even when not compared to God, truly worthless.

The worst thing of all is this: These 'other gods' warp your soul and diminish you. You become what you worship. "*They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.*" If it is God you worship, you are enriched, ennobled. If it is anything else, you are diminished.

There is more. God also says, "*They did not ask, 'Where is the LORD, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and ravines, a land of drought and utter darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives?'*" In the light of the people of Israel and Judah's past with God, we would have expected them to turn to God for help. Instead, they kept their backs turned to God and sought help elsewhere – from political alliances with Babylon or with Egypt.

This is universal: When we leave God, we leave the fountain of living water to become reliant on our own insufficient resources. In verse 13 it is described with a striking metaphor: "*They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.*" In a dry land where rain comes intermittently, people understand the importance of storing water. A broken cistern can be a death warrant.

4. So, how do we respond to the God who cares deeply for us, even when we turn our backs on him? As we have stressed these previous two Sundays, there is a constant call from God throughout the book of Jeremiah: *Return, return, return*. God is not out for revenge or to punish us. We do a good enough job of punishing ourselves when we turn our backs on God! God always, always offers us the possibility of returning to his love and protection. Jesus tells the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son. In each of them there is a passionate longing for what is lost and a joyful feast once the sheep, the coin, the prodigal are found. All three of these parables echo God's pain and distress at the thought of his great loss. All of them describe the great joy when even one person returns to the fold.

But there is even more. This is what stirs Jeremiah to action – confronting the authorities in Jerusalem, speaking truth to power, even as he has to pay a price for it. He is thrown into a dungeon. He is ostracised and told that his ravings are in opposition to the will of God. False prophets and false kings come down hard on him, but Jeremiah never flinches, no matter the cost. He confronts what is wrong in society. In the words of God's charge to him in chapter 1, he takes up the call "to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow..." But he is also commissioned "to build and to plant." Jeremiah constantly reminds his people that God is ready to take them back, to resume the relationship they have broken so heinously. This is the gospel

A GOD WHO CARES DEEPLY

in a nutshell, graphically displayed on the cross by our Lord Jesus. He reminds them also to do what is good and just and revert from their evil ways. This is what we are here for as a church: To confront what is wrong; to proclaim the gospel; to do and encourage what is good and right. This is our prophetic calling. May our Lord strengthen our resolve to do this and may he give us the vision, the courage, and the strength. But, above all, may we always remember God, for he alone is the source of all this.

Amen.

Rev Dr Breda Ludik
2 July 2023

4. More than optimism

Jeremiah 32:1-15

1. Let's first set the scene for the story that is told in our passage of Scripture. It is the year 587 BC and Jerusalem is besieged by the Babylonian army. For many years the people of Judah have been under threat of the two superpowers of the time: Egypt in the south and the Babylonian empire to the northeast. Ten years earlier, the rightful king of Judah, Jehoiachin, was deposed by the Babylonians for his anti-Babylonian politics. They looked for a more pliable substitute and found the ideal one in his uncle, Zedekiah, and duly installed him as a puppet of the Babylonian regime. He was a weakling, easily persuaded to give in to the demands of the Babylonians, but, unfortunately for Judah, also easily swayed by his advisors. Lately, they advised him to pledge loyalty to Egypt – the other superpower of the day. But Egypt has left them in the lurch, and the Babylonian army was sent to avenge the revolt against them by razing Jerusalem to the ground and deporting all the leaders and priests to Babylon. At the time of our story, siege walls are already being built against the battlements of Jerusalem and they can expect to see Babylonian helmets appear over the walls any day.

In the years leading up to the siege, Jeremiah was a thorn in the flesh of the proxy king and the advisors and priests who supported him. For that reason, he was placed under a kind of house arrest in the courtyard of the palace guard, having previously survived being thrown into a well. Jeremiah can clearly see that the people of God have strayed from loyalty to God, from keeping the law, and from fixing their hope for the future on God. Instead, they have fallen into idolatry by incorporating foreign gods into their worship and following the practices associated with them. They have a very relaxed attitude towards the Law of God and have learnt to rely on their own political schemes to ensure the future. This is described by Jeremiah as 'broken cisterns that cannot hold water' with which they supplanted the living water that God provides. In these last years, Jeremiah can clearly see the writing on the wall and announces the fall of Jerusalem and the capture and exile of King Zedekiah. This sits like a pebble in the king's shoe, who comes to Jeremiah in the courtyard and asks him, "Why? Why do you prophesy as you do?" One could forgive King Zedekiah for being puzzled – but only if you remove God from consideration – something Jeremiah never did. For Jeremiah the answer is as clear as day.

2. See, from Jeremiah's vantage point things look very different. Jeremiah looks at things in Jerusalem from God's angle. Things look very different there from how they look from Zedekiah's perspective, for Zedekiah only considers human power and politics and takes no account of God. But here's the problem: I would guess that no amount of explaining to King Zedekiah would have penetrated his lack of understanding that things are very different from God's perspective. And so, we find Jeremiah doing something absolutely crazy – something that just might penetrate the defenses of King Zedekiah and like-minded people. Jeremiah buys a plot of land in Anathoth. He does this while the Babylonian army is encamped on the very field. It would make as much sense as buying a plot overlooking the Zaporizhian nuclear power plant today!

There were a number of laws in Israel that protected the property rights of the twelve clans who were initially given the Promised Land. The idea was that God's gift of land to a specific

clan could not be taken over by anyone from outside the clan. One of the rules that we find in Leviticus 25:25-31 is that a person falling into poverty is only allowed to sell their property to a relative, beginning with the nearest relative. And then, there are ways to buy the property back when things look up. God comes to Jeremiah and tells him that his uncle Hanamel is going to come to him and ask him to buy his field in Anathoth, since he is the nearest relative. By all measures, Jeremiah should have said, "You must be crazy! Why would I want to buy a plot of land on which the Babylonian army is encamped?" But God gives Jeremiah an opportunity to do something shocking – crazy, if you use look at the situation with King Zedekiah's blinkered eyes. Zedekiah only sees the invincible Babylonian army and the ruin that is coming. Jeremiah sees God at work. And in the rest of the chapter, he unpacks the meaning of what he did.

In verse 17 he speaks to God: "*Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.*" Jeremiah's act of faith is done from his knowledge of God's power. And then, to anchor his faith statement, he pages through the family photo album that we saw in God's hands last Sunday – the story of the desert wanderings – and points out God's mighty deeds in the past. Not only does Jeremiah believe that God is not daunted by the Babylonian army; he also finds proof of this in God's mighty deeds in the past. And so, Jeremiah does this crazy thing: He buys his uncle's land, paying the full price for it, even while he certainly had grounds to ask for a sizable reduction in price. In doing this, he puts his money where his mouth is. He shocks King Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem into taking note that there is another reality – a reality where God determines all – the reality that Jeremiah so firmly believes in.

3. Doesn't it remind you of the first chapter of St Paul's letter to the Corinthians? He writes, "*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ...Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*" The fact that we as Christians hold on to the reality of God's mighty presence in this world makes us do things that seem a little crazy to those who do not see what we see. *But we take God into account* – the God of grace; Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to save the world. In a situation where everything we see convinces us that there is no hope, the gospel still resounds. The mighty and gracious God can and is willing to make a difference.

And so, towards the end of our chapter in Jeremiah, we find God speaking. (Notice that I have used my highlighter to mark God's emotions, as we have challenged one another to do in reading the book of Jeremiah.) Verse 37-38: "*I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety. They will be my people, and I will be their God.*" Notice again how all that happens to his people affects God deeply. God does not pass over the injustices and unfaithfulness and sin of his people. God cares deeply about his relationship with his people, and also about justice, goodness, beauty and many other things that he poured into his world. Israel and Judah have trampled on these things, and this has stirred God to anger, banishing them into exile. But anger and wrath are not aspects of God's character, while grace is. Therefore, God limited his anger and wrath, and we get the next, very wistful emotion expressed after God announces his determination to bring them back out of exile: "*They will be my people, and I will be their God.*"

4. There is one detail of Jeremiah's crazy transaction that we should not miss: Jeremiah gives his secretary Baruch instructions to put the deeds of sale for the field in Anathoth into a clay jar,

JEREMIAH - A GOD WHO CARES DEEPLY

where they will last a long time. Jeremiah is not offering a quick fix. He knows that the sheer weight of Israel's transgressions has set historic forces in motion and that God is going to allow much of it to run its course. But in that time, they should know that God will never abandon them. The time will come when, once again, they can return to their lands and family, when they will again bask in the full warmth of God's provision. On that day, Jeremiah can dig up the clay jar with the documents and take full possession of his purchase. On that day, the people of God can again sing of God's goodness. This is more than optimism. This is hope, part of the essence of the Christian faith. And it is not merely hope for one day in heaven; God is at work in our world, right now, giving us hope.

Tony Campolo tells the story of a black church in Philadelphia in the USA, where he was a member for a time. He was sometimes asked to preach and then, he says, he found the responses from the people in the pews quite energizing. Whenever he was on a roll, he was encouraged by calls of, "Preach, brother, preach!" And whenever he found himself lagging, he would hear, "Help him, Jesus, help him!" The preaching style, he says, was very informal and very rousing.

One Good Friday service a grizzled old veteran of the pulpit preached a sermon he would never forget. The whole sermon consisted of improvisations on one sentence: "It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!" This is more or less what Tony Campolo reports, with my improvisations for Scotland and SALU:

It's Friday and Jesus is hanging on the cross, but Sunday's coming!
It's Friday and the disciples and the women are crying, but Sunday's coming!
It's Friday and homeless people are sleeping in the streets, but Sunday's coming!
It's Friday and poor widows are struggling to feed their children, but Sunday's coming!
It's Friday and there is war in Ukraine and people are dying, but Sunday's coming!
It's Friday and climate change is threatening life on our planet, but Sunday's coming!
It's Friday there is famine and drought in many African countries, but Sunday's coming!
It's Friday and the cost of living is coming down hard on many people, but Sunday's coming!
It's Friday and the Church of Scotland faces dwindling numbers, but Sunday's coming!
It's Friday and our congregation is still waiting to hear what the future holds for us, but Sunday's coming!
It's Friday, but Sunday's coming!

Amen.

*Rev Dr Breda Ludik
9 July 2023*

5. The way of the cross

READING: Jeremiah 20:1-2 and 7-13

1. Jeremiah had his share of martyrdom. He was thrown in a well and left to die. The priest Pashur (most likely the administrative head of the temple) had him beaten and put in the stocks to be laughed at and ridiculed by all who passed by. He was ostracised and insulted by his friends and the people of Jerusalem. He was threatened. He was imprisoned in the courtyard of the palace guard. But Jeremiah never budged. He was true to his calling right to the end. For that, he deserves our admiration. But there is one mistake we should never make: We should never imagine that it was somehow easy for him and that he never felt like giving it all up. The passage that was read to us today is proof of that. In fact, the passage can seem so harsh that we might be stopped in our tracks and ask, “Can we really say these things!? Can we say what he says about God having deceived him? Can we be so vindictive towards our enemies? Is it not a lack of faith to pray like this? Shouldn’t we simply turn to God and express our conviction that we are safe in his hands? Should Christians not always be buoyant and positive and happy?”
2. A little more than 20 years ago, I had a hard time to convince my colleagues in our congregation that we should try to preach from the passages prescribed by the Revised Common Lectionary for Sunday services. At that stage, each minister picked his own passage every week. This tended to end up with a very thin Bible from which the congregation was fed. Favourite and well-known passages were preached regularly, while large tracts of Scripture lay untouched. Preaching from the Lectionary would go a long way towards solving this problem. One of the counterarguments was that our monthly baptism Sunday would not be served by this, as the passages for that Sunday could be completely off the mark. (Our congregation had a very large contingent of young married couples and there were a number of baptisms every month.) I countered the argument by saying, “Every passage in Scripture is a baptismal text, since baptism gathers all of the gospel into one act.” In the end, they agreed for us to give it a try for a few months.

The first baptism Sunday arrived, and I was on duty. To my horror, the preaching passage for the Sunday was Lamentations 1 – a desperate lament after the fall of Jerusalem. Me and my big mouth! I soon became desperate to see how this negative stuff could be related to baptism, which was such a happy and grace-filled occasion. And then the penny dropped. Here is some of what I came to realize in my struggle with the passage in Lamentations 1 – and my conclusions fit Jeremiah 20 as well.

3. The first thing we should admit is that serving God in a world like ours often means going against the norms and convictions of society. Of course, there is always an overlap between the beliefs and principles of Christians and those of broader society, but we often find ourselves deeply at odds with the world. In those times it becomes clearer than at other times what it means when Jesus says “*Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*” (Matthew 16:24). Following Christ, serving Christ, comes at a cost. Jeremiah realized this from the start. He dealt with it wonderfully well, never giving in to the pressure put on him by the kings, priests, false prophets, population of Jerusalem, and even his friends. What was his secret? A strong faith? Certainly. But that was not all. One of the things that was crucial in helping him stay the course was his ability to turn to God in lament, to speak

his mind fearlessly. Far from being a sign of a weak faith, the occasions when Jeremiah did this are signs of a healthy and robust faith. This might sound like a strange statement, but let me explain why I say this.

When Jeremiah turns to God in lament, he avoids four very destructive blind alleys.

4. The first blind alley: Keeping up appearances before God. God seeks an authentic and close relationship with his children. If we hold back on our true feelings and only say to God what we think he would prefer to hear, we create distance between ourselves and God. If we limit what we say to God, we never enter that place where we can entrust him with the deepest stirrings of our heart. There are times in all of our lives when the going gets tough. If we cannot fully express this to God, it eats away at the authenticity of our relationship with him. And even more so if the tough times we are experiencing come as a result of our Christian faith.

This is why there are so many lament psalms in the Bible. They outnumber the praise psalms. They are not a sign of a lack of faith, but quite the opposite: They are signs of a close relationship with God. We should notice that they are prayers. They are conversations with the one closest to the person who wrote down the psalm and not complaints aired to lash out at society. By praying as he does here, Jeremiah shows us the way into a more intimate relationship with God. Notice that he even takes on God in a way that, at first glance, seems totally disrespectful. *“You deceived me, LORD, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed.”* The Hebrew word translated as “deceived” is much harsher than the translation suggests. Quite literally it means “seduced”. You have exploited my vulnerability. You have conned me. Jeremiah saying this does not show disrespect. It demonstrates a close and intimate relationship with God where he is given the freedom to even come up with a reproach like this. I find this quite incredible.

This takes us to the second blind alley we avoid if we follow Jeremiah’s lead.

5. The second blind alley: Turning our back on God and on our calling. If I allow my relationship with God to become inauthentic by not sharing my distress and negative emotions with God, I keep some distance between me and God. In time, this gap might widen until my relationship with him becomes so superficial that it ceases to be meaningful. And then it just kind of peters out. Or, when a great crisis strikes, I turn my back on God, not believing he would help me in any way. Having the freedom to go to God with any fear or complaint causes a close and personal relationship to develop that can stand up to both fatigue and crisis. We see this demonstrated in Jeremiah’s rocksteady faith that never lets go of God, even when he feels that God is expecting too much from him.

The same holds true for his sense of calling. Jeremiah is beaten, put in the stocks, ridiculed by all, because of the unpopular message from God he delivers. He tells God of his dilemma: *“But if I say, ‘I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name,’ his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.”* What a dilemma! When he speaks out, he gets into deep trouble. But when he doesn’t speak out, it becomes like a burning fire inside that he cannot contain. He can’t NOT speak out. That would destroy a part of who he is. That would have him limp through the rest of his life as half a human being. And so, he turns to God to tell him how hard it is to serve him. And after that, he seems to be strengthened in his calling. That is how it works when a relationship with God is so close and

authentic that even something as sensitive as this can be freely expressed. I have come to believe that the greatest expressions of faith in the Bible are not the praise hymns, but the laments. For someone to cling to God even when he or she has to pray, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is a sign of great faith.

6. The third blind alley: Taking vengeance. It might sound as if Jeremiah’s prayer is very vengeful. He prays, “*LORD Almighty, you who examine the righteous and probe the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance on them, for to you I have committed my cause.*” Notice two things about Jeremiah’s prayer: The first is that he puts his case before God, but indicates that God might view things otherwise. He speaks to God as the one who examines the righteous (in this case, Jeremiah) and probes the heart and mind. This leaves him open to God convincing him if he is wrong and if his motives are wrong. We are not usually that willing to let go of our wounded feelings when we feel that we have been done an injustice, are we? This is a kind of honesty that comes with prayer. The second thing to notice is that he leaves vengeance to God. He does this in the full knowledge that God is not vengeful and not easy to anger, while knowing that God is just.

Discussing your experience with God when you have been wronged does two important things: It helps you to gain an even-handed perspective. We tend to let our emotions run away with us, but when we speak to God, we know that we need to be as honest as possible. This is when we may discover that there might have been extenuating circumstances when the person wronged us, or that we ourselves need to carry part of the blame. Or we might discover that the wrong we were done is something smaller and more contained than we thought. In the process (and this is the second thing that happens to us) we are put on the road to forgiveness. You might remember that in our series on forgiveness last year, we saw that the process of forgiveness can only start once we have clarified the wrong that’s been done to us: Is it something that can simply be excused or is it inexcusable? How much blame does the other person carry? Only when clarity on all these points is reached can we make the decision to forgive and not seek vengeance, to leave things to God. This is what happens to us when we approach God with the complete honesty we hear in Jeremiah’s prayer.

7. The fourth blind alley: Self-deprecation. When things go wrong in our lives, we could do the opposite of the previous blind alley: We could tell ourselves, “You are a failure. You are a loser.” Something happens when we take these things to God. In God’s company we get in touch again with our identity as beloved children of God. We get perspective on the world we live in to know that some things are only failures when seen from the wrong side. We get forgiveness and healing if we have sinned. And then we can enter life again and serve God to our utmost capacity.
8. So, this is more or less what I told the parents of the five little children who were baptised that Sunday: Tell your children this: Being baptized into God’s family is a wonderful gift. They have a God to whom they can turn in their darkest moments and say exactly what they feel. He listens. He understands. He cares. But also share your joys and your longings and all that matters to you. All of this matters to God. This is the God we serve. This is what we learn from Jeremiah today. Amen.

6. Flower where you are planted

READING: Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

*Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.
Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.*

We continue our series on Jeremiah – a God who cares deeply. Our theme today is *Flower where you are planted*.

Two weeks ago, Jane led us in our prayers for the future and for others. She framed her prayers using her notebook: amazing things have happened... *Amazing things will happen*.

Amazing things have happened. She highlighted that Elgin had given us their 0.5 ministry post to allow us to call a full-time minister; that in Breda we have been given a minister with the wisdom, experience, and grace to lead us through all the Presbytery planning and buildings discussions in such a way that we'd avoided acrimony and divisions. And because of that evidence, we can expect that amazing things will happen in the future.

God has plans for us, He knows what he is doing! And we have acknowledged that. We sang at the beginning of the service *Our God is an awesome God*. In the all-age part of the service, we saw that God has plans for us. Even though they may not be quite what we thought, whatever those plans are, they will ultimately be good for us.

As we know, a week is a long time in politics. And that is also true in the life of SALU, particularly since Wednesday and Breda's health update. *'God has plans to prosper us' rings a bit hollow, doesn't it?*

But amazing things have happened and will happen. God providentially inspired Jane to that prayer and God also gave us our reading for this morning. This reading for today was planned eight or nine weeks ago!

From the get-go in this series, Breda encouraged us to take a marker and highlight all the emotions attributed to God in the passages we read on Sunday and in the whole of Jeremiah – and then to explore how that impacts on our own experience and understanding of God, and on how we then respond to God.

So, let's get out our pens and underline *'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'* as countless other Christians have done to this verse, one of the most popular go-to Bible verses.

But also underline *'seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper'*.

The Hebrew word for peace is **shalom**: peace with God, peace with each other, peace with your neighbour, peace with yourself, peace with creation. We need to hold onto this, and I will unpack it further in a minute or two.

If I'm being honest, since Alastair's emails, my mood and thoughts have resonated with those of Private Frazer, John Laurie's TV character in *Dad's Army*: 'We're doomed. Doomed!'

And if we spend any time looking at the news, we see more dark clouds gather. The question becomes: Is the world going to end through Covid or some other infection? through nuclear war with China or Russia? through robots and artificial intelligence? or just climate change? We can easily hear Private Frazer's words again: *We're doomed. Doomed.*

Closer to home, the church is in decline in the west and particularly in the UK. There is increasing Bible illiteracy. And what about the Church of Scotland – or the church in Scotland? Each time a congregation disbands or, as is likely to happen with SALU, leaves a building behind, we experience grief and loss. We mourn the places where significant events have happened in our lives: baptisms, marriages, funerals. We feel: God was once here for me, but now that place is gone.

Private Frazer again: *We're doomed. Doomed!*

What about me? What about you? Yes, Peter and Paul tell us we are *sojourners and exiles*. Our citizenship is in heaven. So yes, we will feel at odds with the surrounding culture – the kingdom of God versus the kingdom of man. We are in Babylon.

We may also be dealing with more personal exiles. We may not feel home is home. We may feel God is far off – for whatever reason – be it health, finances, relationships, the work environment, the place where we live. In short, we find ourselves in the desert, another kind of exile.

But we have been there before. And God has done amazing things.... Maybe we're not doomed. God has got our backs!

Through Jeremiah we have been learning of a God who is not distant, of a God who cares, who feels, who is passionate, who is emotional, and who wants people to return to Him, so that we may know *shalom*.

He's a God who has plans for us...

For the Jews carried off into exile, life was turned upside down. Everything they knew was gone. They were now surrounded by a different culture, a different language, different foods – and they were surrounded by foreign gods. They were 900 miles from home, a journey that would take about four months (Ezra 7:9).

What we refer to as the Babylonian exile happened in four phases over twenty-five years:

- 605 BC: Deportation of Judean nobility (Daniel 1:1–6; Chronicles 36:6–7)
- 597 BC: Deportation of additional elite (Jeremiah 52:28–30; 2 Kings 24:10–16)
- 586 BC: Temple and Jerusalem destroyed (2 Kings 25:1–21)
- 581 BC: Another deportation (Jeremiah 52:30) before their promised return 70 years later.

Our passage relates to the time just after the second phase, before the big deportation with the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the temple. Jeremiah writes a letter from God to the exiles. It is a letter of hope and comfort to people whose lives have been turned upside down, who have lost everything and were probably going to die in captivity. (They were unlikely to be alive in 70 years, the length of the exile that God had promised!)

The letter informs the exiles that they are in it for the long haul, so they need to prepare a future for their children and grandchildren:

*Build houses and settle down;
plant gardens and eat what they produce.
Marry and have sons and daughters;
find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage,
so that they too may have sons and daughters.*

In the shorter term, Jeremiah urges them to serve the community in which they find themselves, even if it is a foreign land – to flower where they are planted.

*Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.
Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.*

The passage teaches us that our service to God is not dependent on our circumstances, but that we can be true to our calling wherever we find ourselves. This resonates with the upside-down kingdom which we have addressed before, and the prophetic ministry we addressed in this series: *to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.*

Note that it's a win-win situation. Everyone prospers! But we must be proactive. And what we do has to be supported by prayer and imploring people to *return, return, return* to God - remembering that it's not in our strength we do this, as we uproot and tear down systems of injustice, destroy pride and envy and hatred.

So, let's build communities of mercy, compassion, justice, and peace. Let's plant gardens of forgiveness, reconciliation, trust. Let's create communities where there is respect and dignity, not only for every human being, but for the whole of creation.

This is not a to-do list, nor an exhaustive list. But let us seek the welfare of our city, our state, and our nation, as we learn how to sing the Lord's song in a strange land; as we outwork SALU's mission statement: *to know, to love, to serve.*

I can't sugarcoat this. The kingdom of God is an upside-down kingdom, with values that can be very different from society at large. God's ways are not the ways of Babylon, or necessarily those of the elite of Israel and Judah, who had led the nation to turn away from God. They had either made God in their own image, or they had excluded God altogether in their deliberations – not unlike most of our politicians and policy makers of today. And so, friction or even worse (persecution) is inevitable, as we saw in our series on Revelation.

Sadly, there will always be religious leaders who are willing to tell people what they want to hear – leaders who offer false hope and quick fixes:

For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. (2 Timothy 4:3)

After this week's news, we may feel as though we are going back into the desert, and in that sense, back into exile. But God uses these times to shape and mature our faith. We have been there before in previous vacancies, and SALU has spiritually matured! God uses these desert times as times of renewal – renewing our focus on God, equipping people with new skills, and taking us out of our comfort zones.

In their exiles, the Jews wrestled with the God questions and learned that worship could happen anywhere, not just in the temple. Synagogues became a vital part of the community, and God used these communities to help the spread of the gospel. They were often the first point of contact as Paul and his co-workers spread the message of the gospel. Much of the Hebrew Bible was formed during periods of exile.

In desert times we develop new skills and hone existing ones for bringing about the kingdom of God. It is not a time to withdraw from the world. It is a time to serve the community in which we find ourselves. The call is to serve Babylon without becoming Babylonians ourselves. (Remember Daniel in our series on Daniel.)

We must avoid the trap of merely trying to survive, both at an individual level and as a church. We must avoid the trap of vacancy fatigue. It's going to be interesting. It's going to be amazing as we see how God's plans work out for us. Are we ready for that challenge?

Here and now is the time to serve God – not in some deferred future when things are better or one day in the new heaven and new earth. God is a God who cares deeply, not only for the church, **BUT FOR THE WHOLE WORLD** in the here and now!

And here I finish with words from Breda on this passage as we look to the future:

- Embrace where you are now. God has not left, but he might not be in the traditional places you have grown accustomed to. Avoid the trap of nostalgia.
- Be careful of quick fixes – even with passages of Scripture that seem to support them.
- Don't withdraw simply because you feel that the church has less influence in society but participate as Christians.
- Hold fast to a guaranteed future. Remember, you have a promise from God.

Let us pray:

*Lord God, we give thanks for the ministries of Breda and France,
for their gifts of teaching, for wisdom, for music,
for their gifts of enabling and friendship.*

*We pray that as we head into vacancy,
we will embrace the challenges ahead
and pray for the peace and prosperity of the communities you have given us.*

*We pray that we may flower where you have planted us
and that when we look back to this new exile,
we will be able to say
'God has done amazing things.
He had a plan for us.
He is an awesome God'.*

*And we pray also for Francé and Breda...
You have plans for both of them,
plans to prosper them and not to harm them,
plans to give them hope and a future.*

*We pray that they and their family: Minke Ann, Junie and Ben,
and their extended family
will know your shalom –
that peace that only you can give
particularly at this time.*

*We ask for your blessing on them,
for safe travel and continuing medical care.*

*And so, we leave them in your care
until we meet again,
either in this world or in the world to come.*

Amen

*Grant Cumming
30 July 2023*

7. A God of second chances

Reading: Jeremiah 18:1-10

*The days are coming, declares the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.*

We come to the seventh and last in our series in Jeremiah, under the umbrella heading: *A God who cares deeply*. Today's focus is on *A God of second chances*.

Today's sermon is a more reflective sermon, but at the same time, it acts as a kind of scene setter and introduction combined to the next series Breda and I were planning!

Most scene setters we have done have had straplines, so here is today's: *The show must go on* – meaning that an event or activity (in this case, a sermon and sermon series) must continue even if there are problems or difficulties (in this case Breda's sick leave). So, we will continue with our planned sermon series, and our next series, which will be on evangelism. And we will carry on with all aspects of our church life as best we can.

Here is the summary slide from our *Healthy Church* series:

A church has an upward face, an inward face, and an outward face.

The upward face is worship.

The inward face is all that we do to support one another and to help one another grow in our faith.

The outward face is all the church does to serve their community and to share the good news of the gospel (evangelism).

Last week we looked at the first part of the outward face, serving the community, through the lens of Jeremiah 29:7:

Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

We linked this to our prophetic calling as part of the five-fold ministry from Ephesians 4:11-12:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

We also made the comment that to a varying degree, we all have components of each these five ministries.

Breda pointed out that a prophet is a person who is in touch with God, and who sees the world from God's perspective. So, someone with a prophetic ministry hears and listens to God. They have a helicopter view of what's going on. They understand the times and what needs to be done. They find creative solutions and vision for situations.

In our prophetic role, we are to challenge society, and challenge thinking. We are motivated (or *called*, if you like) to action – not from some moralism, not from self-righteousness, but because we feel God’s passion to become the hands and feet and voice of God, as we seek the peace and prosperity of the community. We are to flower where we have been planted, preparing a future for our children and our grandchildren. We uproot and tear down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant as we go about the work God has given us to do in establishing His upside-down kingdom in the here and now, serving the community.

Today’s focus is on a God of second chances and why this is a foundational truth in the mindset of a healthy church.

The Bible gives us lots of metaphors to help us get our heads around who God is. For example: shepherd, king, ruler, judge, farmer, builder, gardener, husband, father, mother, lover.

Our first reading this morning invites us to see God as an artisan and an artist, a metaphor we find right at the beginning of our Bibles.

Genesis 1 portrays God as the first poet, designer, metalworker, and landscaper, as God speaks, divides, fashions, and populates the cosmos.

In Genesis 2:7 God first shapes clay, sculpting and forming humankind from the sediment of the earth. As God’s hands knead and smooth the moist dirt, God breathes life into his creation.

Our reading today is an acted-out parable. Jeremiah is told to go to the potter’s house where he observes that the potter is in complete control of the clay. He can do with it whatever he wants. He is not committed to any particular form for the clay. He can reshape the clay until he has the clay just the way he wants it – the point being that whatever God wants to do, he can. God is in charge. He is sovereign. What he wills, happens.

“Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?” declares the Lord. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel.”

But it’s not quite as black and white as that. It’s not as deterministic, as predetermined. For we then get a series of *ifs* and *thens*.

The first *if* in each paragraph is God’s initial decision to uproot or plant. The second *if* is Israel’s decision – Israel’s freedom to choose. The *thens* are God’s response to that decision.

“If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.”

Free will muddies the waters! God can even change his mind... The outcome depends on Israel’s response. Actions have consequences!

God is involved in his creation, and he ultimately has the final say as the Potter, but it depends on the way his creation acts. Actions have consequences.

In the following chapter, chapter 19 of Jeremiah, the parable continues to be acted out. Because of Israel’s ultimate refusal to return to God, the pot is smashed. When clay is moist, it is malleable, but

once it is hardened, there is nothing else that can be done. In this case, Israel's continued decision to SIN (to say, 'Shove off, God. I'm in charge, No to your ways') led to a time when they were no longer malleable. The clay had become hardened, or in our parlance, the heart was hardened, and so the Potter finally gave up and binned it. This is a solemn warning to those who continue to not have God in their lives. There comes a time when enough is enough, when God calls it a day. But until that day, God's grace is there. His words echo through the ages and the generations: *Return... return... return.*

The job of the evangelist – the outward face of the church – is to serve the community, to serve the place where God has planted us, and that includes telling people this good news: *God is a God of second chances. Return, return, return.*

The emphasis of the Jeremiah series has been very much on a God who cares deeply. And Breda's aim in studying Jeremiah was to show us that the God of the Old Testament is very much the same God that we find in the New Testament:

- A God of grace
- A God of love
- A God who is relational
- A God who is involved in his creation
- A God who wants people to return to him
- A God of restoration

Through Jeremiah, we have been learning of a God who is not distant, a God who cares, who feels, who is passionate, who is emotional.

Early on in this series, Breda suggested that instead of asking 'What is the worst sin anyone could commit?', we should ask, 'Which sin causes God the most pain?'

Whatever your answer is, it comes down to forgetting or excluding God from your life, your decision-making, and your future. It's saying 'Shove off God. I'm in charge. No to your ways.'

And it causes God pain – excruciating pain. It causes God to grieve.

Not only does it damage your relationship with God, but it also damages your relationships with others, with yourself and with creation. There is no peace. There can be no *shalom*. There can be no meaningful prosperity.

God wants people to return to him. He is the God of second chances, third chances, fourth chances... But there is a line in the sand.

In Jeremiah we have seen how the language God uses of Israel and Judah – of a nation turning away from God – is the language of unfaithfulness, of promiscuity, of prostitution, of a woman not just having one extramarital affair, but many!

We feel God's pain. We see that God is heartbroken with his people's promiscuity, of their worship of everything and anything else but Him.

This is not the way it was supposed to be between God and his people. The covenant made at Sinai after their escape from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea was 'I will be your God and you will be my people.'

From this series, we have seen that first the Northern Kingdom and then the Southern Kingdom faced God's judgment for turning away. Actions have consequences!

But despite the punishment, there is a way back. God says, "I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:32). Why a new covenant? Simple answer! "Because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them."

Israel and Judah had torn up their agreement to be God's people. They had become adulteresses, running after other gods. And yet, even then, God was prepared to institute a new agreement – a new relationship with Israel and Judah, *a new covenant* (the only times we find these words in the Old Testament is here in Jeremiah).

Otherwise, they – and ultimately, we – would have been eternally divorced/separated from God.

This new covenant is down to grace. Despite the rejection, the adultery, God wants us to *return... return... return*.

In this new covenant, the same Torah, the same Law and commandments, will be written on our hearts. They will not be outside laws that have to be obeyed, but because of this inward movement, this inward transformation, they will be something people want to do rather than have to do.

Note the 'I will's':

I will make a new covenant...

*I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.*

*I will be their God,
and they will be my people...*

*For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.*

What Jeremiah did not know was that this new covenant would be inaugurated some 500-plus years later with Jesus' Last Supper, where forgiveness would be through his blood, spilt through his death by crucifixion, and not through animal sacrifices. It would not only be the Torah but also God himself who would subsequently dwell in the believer.

God does everything possible to draw us all to repentance, offering forgiveness and second chances (2 Peter 3:9). But if we continue to reject Him, the offer is withdrawn and, at death, there are no more chances (Hebrews 9:27). The pot will be smashed.

God's grace is our model. We are his hands, his feet, his voice. We offer God's gift of second chances to others: Return... return... return... while you have a chance.

This is also seeking the prosperity of the community.

The term 'evangelism' has negative connotations and much baggage associated with it. Our next series will aim to give us some understanding of what it means for us (individually) and for SALU. It may take us out of our comfort zone, but hopefully we will be less embarrassed, and less uncomfortable with the term. We will use NT Wright's book *Broken Signposts*, and look at how these

A GOD WHO CARES DEEPLY

signposts point to Jesus, and how they can open discussion in a world that is, at best, apathetic or, at worst, hostile to the good news of Jesus Christ.

Amen

Grant Cumming
6 August 2023