

Sermon for 18th September 2022, Year C, Proper 20

Preached at St Michael the Archangel, Smarden

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Luke 16:1-13

Sermon

Over the summer and autumn each year, there are generally two Old Testament readings available to choose from each Sunday. One is specially chosen to relate in some way to the Gospel reading, and that's the one I usually choose to include, as each reading can then be understood in the light of the other. This Sunday, that reading was taken from the book of the prophet Amos, and you'll find it on the inside of the pewsheet. It focuses on financial exploitation of the poor by the rich, which goes very nicely with Jesus' words in the gospel: "You cannot serve both God and Wealth". That is a sermon that almost writes itself!

The alternate Old Testament reading set for today, however, has an entirely different character. This series of readings, which has been gradually working through the book of the prophet Jeremiah week by week, records how that famously downbeat and doom-mongering prophet tried to call the people of Israel back to repentance and the worship of God in the face of the existential threat from the Assyrian empire invading from the north.

With everything going on in our country and around the world, I found Jeremiah's grief and lament both moving and painfully familiar, and so I decided to reflect on that this morning, rather than focus on the gospel reading.

In Jeremiah's time, the people of Israel believed that God and their King would always protect them from any enemy, and so they did not believe that the Assyrians were a true threat. "Is the LORD not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" they said to one another.

On the face of it, you could see this as a great act of faith and trust, so what can Jeremiah be complaining about? Is he just a whining protester? But what Jeremiah sees is a corrupt and selfish society that mistakenly believes it is still in the good graces of God and therefore protected, simply because it is performing all the proper religious services and sacrifices. From Jeremiah's perspective, Israel is like a city whose walls have already been undermined and which will fall at the slightest touch, or in modern terms, like a cartoon character that runs off a cliff and hangs in mid-air for a few seconds before realising that there is now nothing holding them aloft and plummeting to the ground.

Jeremiah sees the truth which the leaders of the nation cannot or will not acknowledge, that their selfishness and lack of obedience to the laws of God's love, will be the cause of their own destruction, and their shallow attachment to the forms of their religion will not save them.

Just seven verses before the beginning of this passage, Jeremiah cries out with those words so often expressed by the excluded and oppressed peoples of every nation: "From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely... saying 'Peace, Peace', when there is no peace." In other words, the comforting words of religion and politics have been revealed as fake and empty. Those in charge are saying 'everything is fine, all is well', when all is certainly not well for those at the bottom or margins of society. 'Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold' as Yeats put it. The core of the apple is rotten and even if the outer flesh still looks ripe, it will collapse in on itself and shrivel, the moment it falls from the tree. It is already too late to do anything about it. The tipping point has been passed.

And so, Jeremiah cries out with such anguish, not so much for himself as for the people all around him. "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick... For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt. I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me".

And then another agonised cry: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” Gilead was the source of a healing balm made from the sap of a tree local to the area, and Jeremiah is lamenting that even the potent healing offered by the land has now failed them, along with the physicians, the priests and religious leaders who administered it.

After all this public misery and pathos, you might not be surprised when later in the story, Jeremiah is thrown into a deep muddy cistern to shut him up. What leaders of a nation in crisis want to hear “I told you so” and “It’s too late now” as the true nature of their predicament finally begins to dawn upon them? Those of you who have seen the recent movie ‘Don’t Look Up’, will have no trouble understanding how resistant denial can be to any onslaught of facts.

The truth is, of course, that Jeremiah turned out to be correct, which is why his words are the ones recorded in the Bible. He was a true prophet. The Assyrians did sweep down from the north in the 8th century BC, conquering and destroying all of Israel, leaving only the southern kingdom of Judah to survive after a failed siege of Jerusalem. But the ten tribes of Israel were completely lost to history.

Two thousand seven hundred years on, we’re left with the question: what relevance has all of this for us today?

To be honest, it is not hard to see a lot of similarities between Jeremiah’s time and ours, but if I start to list them, I imagine that most congregations will be as divided as in Jeremiah’s day. For some, accelerating climate change caused by the economic selfishness of the rich at the expense of the global poor, has become a terrifying self-inflicted avalanche with consequences for everyone that cannot now be prevented. For others, this is fake news promulgated by a selfish global elite who control the mainstream media. For some, our society is falling apart, becoming culturally and materially impoverished and losing its sense of shared identity and community, because humanity has lost the sense that God made us

to be agents of compassion, love, forgiveness, selflessness, kindness, gentleness and inclusion. For others, our society is falling apart because we no longer follow the traditional rules of deference to authority and moral propriety, self-discipline and individual self-reliance.

But I have no doubt that at some level, all of us have at some point felt something of the anguished cry of Jeremiah. “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people”.

We know something in our world is broken, and something has been lost. And we’re no longer sure it can be fixed. We cling ever more tightly to what we have, to nostalgia, or to denial, insisting that all is well, or that if only we make this or that change, then our society will be great again.

Jeremiah is here to say that it may be too late to discover that the real problem is in our own hearts, in our self-interest that blinds us to the harm our lifestyles do to others, in our greed that flourishes inside our rampant insecurity, in our fear that makes us so defensive. Who among us truly accepts that our own way of life has replaced dependence on God’s love with a love of wealth and security, and replaced Christ’s way of sharing and sacrifice with individual success and self-reliance?

What was it Jesus said? “You cannot serve God and Wealth”. And yet, even now, we still try to find a way.