

JEREMIAH – A Prophet of Hope?

(These notes can be used individually or with a small group. They only provide material for the Welcome & Word and some suggestions for Witness section of the small group recommended framework of Welcome; Worship, Word, Witness)

Welcome

Share with someone else or think on your own for a few moments of ways that our society tries to 'take the waiting out of wanting'.

Now consider the practical, emotional and spiritual damage such an attitude to life can have personally and as a society. (If in a small group perhaps undertake this as a whole group)

Word

In our sermon series 'Jeremiah – A Prophet of Hope' we have tried to detect signs of hope at a time when the people of God were to be taken into exile because they had forsaken God's ways and sought to live their lives based on non-Godly values. (If you want to be reminded of previous sermons in this series then visit our website www.stjohnswoodbridge.org.uk where you can download audio versions of these sermons and obtain sermon series notes.)

As we draw near to the end of the series with this penultimate talk our reading today from Jeremiah could be headed

Hoping in the right time.

or

putting the waiting back into wanting

Jeremiah 29 v1, 4-7

This short passage should not be passed over lest its significance be missed. Chapter 29 comprises what appears to be four letters;

- Jeremiah to the exiles [v1-15; 21-23];
- Shemaiah in Babylon to Zephaniah [v25-28];
- Jeremiah to Shemaiah [v24]
- and another letter from Jeremiah to the exiles [v31-32].

It is postulated that this period refers to the days following the downfall of Judah (i.e. after 597BC). It appears this was a time of unrest in the Babylonian Empire and perhaps the hint that it was on the point of collapse. This raised the possibility of the exiles being returned. Some of the prophets in Jerusalem and Babylon may have been beginning to prophesy to the people that they were to get ready to return. These words of Jeremiah were in stark contrast

to what would have been popular messages from others. He tells them to 'build' and 'plant' which is a familiar theme for Jeremiah (Jer 1 v10). This building and planting is not as a separate nation but rather to encourage the people to settle down in the midst of their exile.

*This is what the LORD Almighty,
the God of Israel,
says to all those*

*I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:
"Build houses and settle down;
plant gardens and eat what they produce.
Jer 29 v4-5*

Clearly we know that the prophet Ezekiel who ministered to those in exile was able to organise his own affairs.

*In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day,
while I was sitting in my house
and the elders of Judah were sitting before me,
the hand of the Sovereign LORD came upon me
there.
Ezekiel 8v1;*

Rather than get ready to come home, Jeremiah's words encourage them to do the reverse and settle down. They are to build houses (not temporary shelters) and plant gardens (not a short term undertaking in the Middle East) rather than rely on handouts. Moreover they are to marry and have children and see them be married in turn.

*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.
Increase in number there; do not decrease.
Jeremiah 29 v6*

This speaks of at least a generation remaining in exile.

The time has to be right for the hope of a return from exile. With the perspective of history we know that eventually they did return. (cf Alan Millard in the Lion Handbook to the Bible p413 which suggests exile was from 597BC – 539BC) This letter of Jeremiah to the exiles may have been written about 594BC that is only some 3 years into the exile following the fall of Judah.

Even more revolutionary was Jeremiah's call to pray to the Lord for the peace and prosperity of their oppressors

'Also seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile'

Jer 29 v7.

The NIV Study Bible comments that this is an *'unprecedented and unique concept in the ancient world: working towards and praying for the prosperity of their captors'* (p1164)

This may be a hint of what is to come from the lips of Jesus

'But I tell you 'love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you...'

Matt 5 v44

Jeremiah's letter does contain within it the promise that there will come a time when the exiles would return, when their hopes would be realized.

In v10-14 Jeremiah speaks of what God's plans are for his people. **There will come a time when the people will be returned to the place of blessing.**

This is what the LORD says:

"When seventy years are completed for Babylon,

I will come to you

and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Jeremiah 29 v10-11

But before then there is period of waiting in which so much can be learnt.

In particular they had to re learn what it meant to be completely dependent upon God on himself. Rather than persist with the trappings of physical nationhood and an earthly king, they had to be reminded that they were God's people and that ultimately he was their King even when they had no physical kingdom. The dangers of the people of God having an earthly King which God had warned the people of through his prophet Samuel (cf I Samuel 8 v4-20) had proven to be well founded as many kings especially in Jeremiah's time had lead the people away from God rather than towards God.(note the repeated comment on Kings Jehoiakim; Jehoiachin, & Zedekiah that they *'did evil in the eyes of the Lord'* 2 Chronicles 36v5,v9 & v12)

Witness

This desire for the people of God to want to be like the surrounding culture is not unique to the time of the OT. In our time in the West we have had the trappings of Christendom since the conversion of Constantine and now many writers are observing that this period where Christianity has been the favoured religion is over. (cf Frost and Hirsch *'The Shape of things to come'* p8) In one sense we are therefore entering a period of 'exile' and perhaps are being called upon to re learn our need to be dependent upon God rather than cling to the status we as the Church once enjoyed. What practical implications does this change of context have for us as a local church as we seek to witness in a post-Christendom culture?

At a personal level when we try to take the waiting out of wanting it can not only damage us practically, emotionally and spiritually it might also stop us from learning the deeper lesson of our need to be totally dependent upon God. The people in Jeremiah's time had been rejecting God for some time. Therefore in order to re learn what it meant to be totally dependent upon God and live once more under his rule and reign was to take more than one generation. In what ways can you identify times of personal waiting for God to fulfill the hopes you have as times

- to 'settle',
- to pass on the faith to the next generation
- and to continue to hope even when the fulfillment of that hope seems a long way off?

The time of waiting would be over when an inner change had occurred when

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you
Jer 29 v13-14.

But that is another story!