

SJM 25th June 2017

But the Lord is With Me

Jeremiah 20 v7-13

Psalms 69

Romans 6 v1b-11

Matthew 10 v24-39

Have you ever heard someone use the phrase 'a bit of a Jeremiah'? What does it mean? A pessimist, someone with a gloomy attitude towards the present and the future, cold water kind of person.

Let's take a look at Jeremiah's background and try to understand where this idea comes from. Jeremiah was a prophet to Judah, the southern kingdom for about 50 years from 627BC. He served under Judah's last 5 kings (so there's an element of success, he was at least tenacious):

Josiah (he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, seemingly the last one to do so)

Jehoahaz (lasted 3 months, did evil in the sight of the Lord, was imprisoned and banished from Jerusalem and died in prison in exile)

Jehoiakim (did evil in the sight of the Lord and capitulated with Nebuchadnezzar then rebelled against him and was killed)

Jehoachin (ruled in Jerusalem for 3 months, did evil in the eyes of the Lord just as his father had done, was imprisoned and taken into exile by Nebuchadnezzar)

And was usurped by his uncle Zedekiah who reigned for 11 years but did evil in the sight of the Lord.

'It was because of the Lord's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end He thrust them from His presence.' Jer 24 v20. And throughout this, Jeremiah was a constant voice calling the people back to God and warning them of the consequences of not living as God's faithful people. Not only that, but the other prophets were basically lying and telling the kings and the court what they wanted to hear, that everything would be alright, instead of calling them back to faithful service of the one true God. Jeremiah's peers, his brother prophets were set against him. Immediately prior to the reading from Jeremiah, we read that the chief priest of the temple, the one commissioned with keeping things in order, had had Jeremiah beaten and put into the stocks for making this prophecy:

Jer 19 v4, 8, 11, 14-15 'I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle... I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at... I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended... ¹⁴When Jeremiah came from Topheth, where the LORD had sent him to prophesy, he stood in the court of the LORD's house and said to all the people: ¹⁵Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I am now bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their necks, refusing to hear my words.' And that got him beaten and locked up - so is it any wonder that we then read of him complaining to God (v7&8)? What good *could* Jeremiah possibly speak into that state of affairs?

Jeremiah goes on to cry out to God in utter despair and desperation – *he doesn't want the job he's been assigned* but when he tries to put a lid on it, the message then feels like a burning fire shut up in his bones which he cannot hold in.

So how does this speak to us today, over 2500 years later? Do we face the same torment? Is being a Christian in a world that is largely not Christian an easy task? Is it sometimes easy just to keep quiet about what is truly right and let things slide - or ought we to proclaim God's word at every opportunity? In fact, do we even have the right to speak to the world or does that make us arrogant? Is it easier sometimes to be unfaithful to the eternal truth of the gospel?

Being a Christian was never going to be easy – reread today's gospel passage: 'how much will they malign those of his household... Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth... one's foes will be members of one's own household.' How different is this to what Jeremiah faced? These are Jesus' own words.

Like Jeremiah, **we** are in the thick of it. We are **all** at the coal face which may be scary and threatening, or humiliating, or simply frustrating at times. Yet we are still here, living out our lives among family and friends, work colleagues, neighbours – in and of the world. We are to live lives, like Jeremiah, '(that) tell in the light... (that) proclaim from the housetops' v27, the good news and to do it without fear for this life. We ought not to

be able to hold it in – like the disciples on the road to Emmaus; our hearts should 'burn within us.'

Jeremiah had absolutely no measure of success – he felt ridiculed all day long, he was mocked. So how do we know if we're doing ok? Certainly NOT by whether people accept or reject us (not, us but the gospel message). This is not our measure of success. It's not even our success we should be concerned about. Success as judged by the world is not worth a jot in the light of eternity. Again, look at Jeremiah up against the temple authorities, the king, in fact the entire nation of Israel. They were the ones with wealth and power (they were also the ones who lost wealth and power). In fact, the king, the temple servants, the whole nation lost everything they held as valuable. Salvation is the only thing worth anything and, perversely, that's free!

A lack of response, a negative response from his hearers made Jeremiah wonder if he was doing any good at all – he was often bitter and despondent. It's the same today. *Are we doing any good?* How should we talk of the gospel in situations like the aftermath of the Arena bombing; the despair at the subsequent funerals of the young and the innocent; the horror of events like the Grenfell tower fire and the bitterness of that fallout. How should we talk of the gospel into uncertain political situations like Brexit with a government weak and divided, calling on favours that rouse old, unhealed distrusts and misgivings? Are any of these so far removed from Jeremiah's situation?

How can we face talking about Jesus into such darkness?
How can we face NOT talking about Jesus into such darkness?

We have 1 story to tell. How its' received isn't our concern. We may be discouraged or fearful or timid but that doesn't lessen the value of the story. WE are to tell the truth without demurring. Those who change or lessen the truth are being unfaithful to God's message. We need to make the message heard however popular or unpopular that message is so go and be a Jeremiah!

Persecution: Few Christian leaders in any generation have suffered the criticism, attacks and outright slander that Charles Spurgeon endured. Some of this was inevitable since Spurgeon was a world-renowned preacher and leading pastor of his day in the mid 1800s. Much like the apostle Paul's enemies, Spurgeon's critics attacked his gospel message and accused him of self-seeking motives. During one stressful period, Spurgeon wrote to a friend. "Friends form. Enemies alarmed. Devil angry. Sinners saved. Christ exalted. Self not well."