

Jer 1:1-10 A prophet to the nations

Tim Anderson 8/9/2019

It would have sounded more impressive
if I told you about this after I came back from our holiday,
But let me tell you
about Michelangelo's picture of the prophet Jeremiah.
It's part of his painting of the "Last Judgement" in the Sistine Chapel.
Jeremiah is painted with his face turned to the side.
He can't look at the people.
He can't look at what God is about to do.
His shoulders are hunched forward.
You can see that it's a heavy burden that's weighing on him.
The task he's been given is weighing him down.
His eyes are cast down.
He can't even look up to heaven.
He can't look up to the sky and appreciate the beauty of the day.
He can't meet the eyes of his countrymen.
His hand is covering his mouth.
He simply does not want to say
what God has told him he must say.
It's a posture of absolute despair.
And it's a very accurate painting.
That's how it was for Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah,
one of the priests at Anathoth
who prophesied for 40 odd years
about 600 odd years before Jesus was born.

I wonder if you've ever heard Jeremiah preached in church?

I never have.

As far as I can remember not once.

Certainly not a series that works through the book
and tries to present the message as a whole.

I've never done it before.

It's not that I'm allergic to prophets.

Even ones that wrote big fat books
that are a bit tough to come to grips with.
I've preached on Isaiah and Ezekiel before.
Why does Jeremiah get pushed to the back of the queue?
Well basically Michelangelo's painting tells the story.
It's a hard book.
Some of what Jeremiah has to say is quite confronting.
We sometimes think it's God's job to cheer us up.
But Jeremiah is the longest book in the Bible.
And though it certainly has some wonderful messages of hope,
there is quite a lot of judgement to wade through
before you get to the hope.
Why is that?
Was Jeremiah just a depressed sort of fellow?
If you went back about 100 years ago,
it was pretty common
to try to explain the differences in tone from the different Bible authors
by presuming that was down to their personalities.
Well no doubt the personalities of the authors
do come out in their writings.
Although this is God's Word,
it didn't come to us by mechanical dictation.
God has a way of keeping something
genuinely human and genuinely divine at the same time.
He does it in the person of the Lord Jesus.
He was 100% human and 100% God.
He does it in his word.
The Bible is absolutely the product of the human authors.
They thought about what they wanted to say.
They expressed it with their own personality.
And yet the Bible is absolutely a divine word.
God speaks from its pages with one voice.
The voice that speaks from Jeremiah chapter 31
about the coming of the New Covenant
is as clear as a bell about Jesus and the New Covenant in his blood.

And yet, Jeremiah thought about what he wanted to say.
And he had no idea
exactly what God's plans were 600 years in the future.
But he spoke words about the New Covenant
that couldn't have been phrased any better by one of the gospel writers.
So somehow the Bible is both 100% human and 100% God's Word.

So why is Jeremiah the most despairing of the prophets.
I think it's not so much about his personality as his place in history.
Jeremiah lived in the days of the last kings of Judah.
He began prophesying in the days of the good king Josiah.
Josiah was one of the best kings since the time of King David.
The book of Kings describes it this way, 2 Kings 22:2
"He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord
and followed completely in the ways of his father David,
not turning aside to the right or to the left."
So why should that be such a despairing time to be a prophet?
Prophesying under a good king,
whose heart is turned to the Lord,
should be a time of joy and celebration.
But listen to these words from the prophetess Huldah
to King Josiah, 2 Kings 22:19-20
"Because your heart was responsive
and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have
spoken against this place and its people -
that they would become a curse and be laid waste -
and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence,
I also have heard you,
declares the Lord.
Therefore I will gather you to your ancestors,
and you will be buried in peace.
Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place."
Josiah was a good king,
but his blameless life before the Lord
was only enough for a stay of execution for Judah.

The Lord only relented on punishing his people in Josiah's lifetime.
But the evil King Manasseh had etched Jerusalem's fate in stone.
Judah was doomed before Josiah ever got on the throne.
Josiah only lived till he was 39.

And Jeremiah had to keep prophesying
right through the reigns of Jehoiachim and Zedekiah.
That is, right through the destruction of Jerusalem
by Nebuchadnezzar the Emperor of Babylon.
Jeremiah is not prophesying doom because he's a glum fellow.
He's prophesying doom because God had an unshakeable resolve that
his people needed to be driven from the land he'd given them,
and God appointed Jeremiah to bring that message,
and the message was
that there would be hope for restoration beyond the exile,
but you have to get to the other side of judgement
before you get to hope.
Jesus had to be crucified before he could be resurrected.
Judah had to go into exile before they would be restored.

And so we turn to the call of Jeremiah.

Jer 1:4-5,

"The word of the Lord came to me saying,
'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.'"

Did Jeremiah have a choice about being a prophet?

No. Not one bit.

Did God choose him when he was still in his mum's tummy?

No. Before that even.

God's knowledge of us comes before our physical existence.

God knew that he was going to make you
before you were even a twinkle in your father's eye.

Not just God knew he was going to make some people generally.

Not just God knew that your parents were going to have kids.

God knew you.

He knew you personally.
It's become apparent in our modern world
that if you want to know who you are,
you need to know whose you are.
If you want to know who you are,
you need to know whose you are.
Members of the stolen generation go to great lengths
to find their parents, their siblings.
Children conceived through IVF or given up for adoption
want to meet their biological parents.
Baby boomers spend incredible amounts of time
tracing their family trees and then journeying half way around the world
to look at places their forebears came from.
We've worked out that it matters to people who they belong to.
And God tells Jeremiah,
'Before you were formed in the womb,
I knew you.'
At a far more fundamental level than your ancestry,
you belong to God.
You are his.
He knows you better than you know yourself.
For us that can be a great comfort.
Particularly, I think, if your place in the world humanly speaking
seems insecure.
To the person who never knew their mother or father,
God knows you, you are his.
To the person who has fled their homeland
and feels a stranger where they live.
God knows you,
you are his.

But for Jeremiah,
these words are not words of comfort.
Because God was not going to leave Jeremiah alone.

He wasn't going to be left to teach the Scriptures and do the sacrifices like the other priests of Anathoth.
God had singled him out for a particular task,
and it was not a particularly pleasant task.
"I appointed you a prophet to the nations."
Who wants to be a prophet?
The answer is no one.
Moses tried the same excuse as Jeremiah.
Here are Moses words,
"Pardon you servant, Lord.
I have never been eloquent,
neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant.
I am slow of speech and tongue."
Lord, I'm not good a talking.
I can't be a prophet!
Jeremiah tries the same excuse.
1:6 "Alas Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak;
I am too young."
Jeremiah even had an extra excuse.
Not only could he not talk,
he was also too young.
Moses couldn't try that one,
he was 80 when the Lord called him.
But Jeremiah was only a teenager.
I don't know how to speak!
I'm too young!
Is it any good making excuses to God?
God knew and chose Jeremiah for this work
before Jeremiah was even conceived.
What's the point of telling God you are not up to the task?
Jeremiah thinks about how he is now.
God knows what Jeremiah will become.
In forty years time, he won't be saying he's too young.
And he will have had plenty of practice at speaking.
"Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said.

That's the bit Jeremiah got right.
He is the Sovereign Lord.
What does that mean?
It means he is in control of everything.
Nothing escapes his gaze.
And in particular, if he gives you a job, you've got the job.

And so the Sovereign Lord answers Jeremiah.

1:7-8 "Do not say to me, 'I am too young'.

You must go to everyone I send you to
and say whatever I command you.

Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you and will rescue you,"
declares the Lord.

There is no point telling God the job he has given you is too hard.
The way God always works is to do powerful work with weak tools.

God never takes the best qualified and most able
because if he did,

people would think they had done it
through their own hard work and cleverness.

God brought his own son into the world
through a carpenter and his teenage peasant bride.

They were not kings and powerful people.

Jesus called fishermen and tax collectors
to take his message to the world.

They were not theologians and university professors.

But all of these inadequate people who God called.

They all got the job done.

If you know what God has called you to do,
you can trust him to equip you to do it.

But even taking on board the reassurance that God is faithful
and he will equip his servants for the work he has for them,
there is an ominous sound to God's reassurance of Jeremiah.

1:8 "Do not be afraid of them,

for I am with you and will rescue you,"
declares the Lord.

Hold on a second, Lord.

You said you wanted me to be a prophet.

What's this about rescuing?

Is being a prophet going to put me in such great danger?

What am I going to need rescuing from exactly?

God promises that he will equip us for the job he has for us.

But he most emphatically does not promise
that it will all be plain sailing.

Not a bit of it.

Being the Lord's servant inevitably comes
with more than its fair share of challenges.

Ask Abraham who almost had to sacrifice his son.

Ask Moses who was driven to despair trying to lead the Israelites.

Ask David whose son tried to kill him.

Ask Paul who was flogged, imprisoned and shipwrecked.

Ask Stephen who was stoned.

Ask Julio Ruibal who you've probably never heard of.

In the 1970s and 1980s he was a great evangelist in Colombia.

The drug lords ruled Colombia in those days.

And they were not happy about all these people becoming Christians.

And those drug lords

were some of the most feared people on the planet.

The police certainly were not going to challenge them.

Julio was asked,

"Aren't you afraid?"

He said, "I am immortal

until I finish the work the Lord has for me to do."

In 1995, Julio was gunned down

by assassins connected to the drug traffickers.

He had finished the work the Lord had for him to do.

And he is immortal, in God's presence right now.

So what is the power that God gives his servants.

Jer 1:9-10

"Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me,

"I have put my words into your mouth.

See today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.""

The power that God gives his servants is his words in our mouths. Jeremiah would have very specific oracles from God for his people. And those words are powerful.

God's word always achieves God's purposes.

We don't have God's words in the form of specific oracles given just to us with divine authority.

But we do have God's Word in the Scriptures.

And we have God's call to have that word in our mouths.

To speak God's Word.

And because unlike Jeremiah,

we are not called to speak into a part of history where God's judgement is being unleashed in a way not seen for many generations, for us,

there may well be more building and planting, and less uprooting, tearing down, destroying and overthrowing.

Although we can't escape the fact

that there will be negative consequences to speaking God's Word as well as positive ones.

I'd like to think that it's all about lives being transformed as the good news of the gospel is proclaimed.

But the reality is the Christian life is a mixture.

Jesus said, "Tear down this temple and I will build it in three days."

He tore it down.

And in his resurrection, he rebuilt it.

But it was torn down.

Not just metaphorically.

In AD 70,
the Roman legionaries came through and razed it to the ground.
I'm sure those who like heritage architecture
would really have liked the temple to be preserved
for its historical value.
But in God's economy,
it presented an alternative way to relate to him
aside from through faith in Jesus.
It needed to be removed.
Jesus spoke the word.
And God tore it down.

As we preach the gospel, we will be uprooting and tearing down sin.
We will be planting faith.
We will be building obedience.
We can't escape from uprooting and tearing down sin.
You will have noticed in your own life,
it is stubbornly present.
And it's out there in the world too.
We can't just ignore it.
These idols set themselves up for people's loyalty.
They are in competition to loyalty to the one true God.
There is uprooting and tearing down that needs to happen.
But never for its own sake.
We only uproot and tear down
in order that we might plant faith and build obedience.

So Heavenly Father, we come before you today,
as those who you have known before you formed us in the womb.
You have set us apart for life in our Lord Jesus.
You have put your gospel words in our mouths.
We will not make excuses about our lack of competence.
We know that you equip your servants
to do whatever you ask them to do.
We won't expect it to be an easy road.

But we trust in your promise always to be with us.
And in your name by the power of your word,
we will uproot and tear down,
destroy and overthrow sin and everything that sets itself up against you.
And in your name, by the power of your word,
we will plant faith and build obedience.