

Bennochy church 25th September 2016

Do you ever lament the state of the nation? It wasn't like that when I was young. We can all wear rose tinted glasses that says the past was better. We witness changing morality, ethics, priorities and we wonder if these changes are for the better. I suppose it is all about perspective. It depends on where you are standing and what you see. If someone stands in a different place from you, perhaps someone younger, their view, their perspective of life will be different from ours, even if they are looking at the same thing. I am not actually convinced that things are that much different today, but they are certainly less hidden than they were.

How many times have we put the world to rights, but injustice, inequality and inhumanity just keeps rolling on. It seems we can't help ourselves? An aid convoy outside Aleppo is destroyed and no one takes responsibility. It is described as a war crime. A medical facility in Syria is bombed and no one takes responsibility. Millions of children are severely malnourished in Yemen. Innocents caught up in civil war and no one speaks on their behalf. We ask ourselves, what kind of world do we live in.

The problem with human history is, it has ever been so. *History repeats itself. It has to. For no one ever listens.*

Jeremiah was called to be a prophet of God around 625 BC. The northern Kingdom of Israel had already been destroyed by the

Assyrians in the 8th BC, and the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem, are now under threat from the new empire, of Babylon. Jeremiah is called by God to say to the people of Jerusalem, if you do not change your ways, you will be destroyed by invaders from the north.

To prophet, priest and king he said, because you had been unfaithful to the laws of the covenant, that special relationship between God and his people, and, you had forsaken God by worshiping other Gods, God will now withdraw his blessing from the people of Israel. He proclaimed that the nation of Judah would be faced with famine, be plundered and taken captive by foreigners who would exile them to a foreign land. As you can imagine, this message did not make him the most popular man in the country! He was even condemned to death.

So Jeremiah laments his nation. Here is a man in unbearable sadness. His is a cry that could be heard today in modern day Syria. *"Is there no medicine in Gilead? Are there no doctors there? Why, then have my people not been healed?"*

The agony of the nation is his agony. Their wounds are his wounds. Their grief is shared and there is a bond of despair between man and his people. The words of this poem, could equally be God's lament, as well as Jeremiah's.

It seems to me from the way the passage is written there is an assumption here. The people are not listening. No wonder God

feels betrayed. The prophet can see what is coming. It is inevitable. The future is not foretold. What will happen is the logical outcome of the path chosen by the people of God. It will reach its conclusion in the destruction of the nation, but its people are blind. They worship other God's now. All the prophet and God can do is watch helplessly on.

There is an expectation here. We are the people of God and on that account alone, we will be saved. God is a little behind schedule, but he will come, and the disaster will be averted. The temple of God can never be destroyed. In 587 BC the walls of the city were breached, the temple ransacked and the leaders exiled off to Babylonia.

There is nothing worse than unanswered questions to test our resolve. We want to know what is happening, where we are going and what the plan is. The soul of Jeremiah or is it God, is tested with the question of where will the healing of the nation come from. *"Is there no medicine in Gilead?"*

If God is the healer, then the sickness of the people runs too deep? The road to destruction has already reached its inevitable conclusion. And this awareness raises a new wave of grief in the soul of the prophet, indeed, he cannot cry enough, for the people of Judah. His people. It is a grief that resonates ironically from the heart of God. His love for his people, is the source of Jeremiah's pain.

The church today lives with a deep sense of its own vulnerability. Our influence is no longer what it was and we wonder, what is our role in the life of the nation today. Are we to be, like Jeremiah, only people of lament?

There is no doubt that people are resistant to the message of institutions, and that is what the church, we are an institution struggling to have our voice heard amongst the many competing demands of the world we live in.

In a world of advertising that says, listen to me; in a world of celebrity that says, look at me, and a world where choice is king, and people do their own thing, how do people listen amongst the noise, to the still small voice of God?

I am not suggesting for a moment, we proclaim words of judgement. I don't believe God operates like that. The pain of Jeremiah comes from the love of God for his people. He is seeking the healing of the nation and that is what salvation is all about. Its root is in healing and wholeness.

If ignored, we are still to love. If rejected, we are to be compassionate. If people don't trust us, let us still seek justice. Our message, all are created equal in the sight of God. Let that message ring, ring quietly, ring passionately, but with the power of our hope in God and our strength of faith in the Jesus Christ. Amen.