

Jeremiah 7

Last Sunday Julie began our sermon series on Jeremiah looking at Chapter 1 and today we're continuing with Chapter 7, known as the Temple Sermon, one of the most famous sermons in the Bible which Jesus himself refers to in Mark 11:17. Chapter 7 really consolidates the themes in the intervening chapters. Although it was written about 608BCE it still has much to say to us. It's a long chapter in itself and should be read in conjunction with Chapter 26 which may be the same sermon repeated or a continuation of it. I encourage you to read both chapters – something for you to do later, perhaps when the sun's gone in!

We have the expression “to be a Jeremiah” which describes a pessimistic person foreseeing a calamitous future – but of course the words and messages Jeremiah brought were God's words, not his – though I imagine if you went to a dinner party – if you can remember what such a social occasion was – and found yourself sitting next to Jeremiah you probably wouldn't anticipate having a very jolly time. Jeremiah makes me think of Private Fraser in Dad's Army – We're doomed, we're all doomed!

Jeremiah must have felt very apprehensive standing at the entrance of the temple – probably on a major feast day when the place was heaving and with the Jewish leaders around too – and deliver, shout, this message which the Jews would consider blasphemous and for which Jeremiah could be put to death. Jeremiah was extremely brave and willing to put his life on the line to speak God's truth. I can imagine he was also feeling increasingly exasperated and frustrated. The people didn't want to hear God's message and weren't taking any notice of what they had to do to save themselves, the nation of Judah. And it was Jeremiah's own people who were facing destruction.

I wonder what gives us confidence – makes us feel secure. Perhaps our bank balance, our pension package, our position or status, a full fridge, securing an online food delivery – hopefully our faith. Jeremiah got his confidence, his security, from knowing he was speaking God's word – doing what God has told him to do. The Judeans thought, wrongly, that being near to the temple, God's house, would give them security and save them.

As Julie was saying last week, Judah was very vulnerable. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been taken away into exile by the

Assyrians some 114 years before and so only the Southern Kingdom of Judah remained. Assyria had now fallen. Babylon and Egypt are vying for power and Judah is caught in the middle between them.

Judah has gone downhill spiritually. Remember that God guaranteed protection to the people as long as they kept their side of the agreement, the covenant. God had given them, through Moses, the Ten Commandments – the rules by which they must live. They are breaking so many of the Commandments – stealing, committing murder, swearing, making offerings to Baal, pursuing false gods – the list goes on.

And God tells them not to bother with their sacrifices – he's not interested. All he wants is for the people to be faithful to him.

The people are not behaving according to their covenant with God – they're not keeping their side of the bargain so are at real risk of losing God's protection. And the people are living in denial. Although things might be bad, God won't judge them because the Temple is here and that's where God lives, where heaven and earth are connected. And it bears the Lord's name. God isn't going to destroy his own house, is he? Everything's fine, God will protect Jerusalem and Judah.

And so they carry on in their sinful ways and still go through the motions of temple services and think that everything will be hunky dory.

And the false prophets reinforce this delusion by saying things like "God will do nothing, no disaster will come upon us", Jeremiah 5:12, and "Peace, peace", everything's fine, Jeremiah 6:14.

Jeremiah's sermon has three key points and the first is a call from God to repentance. "Amend your ways and your deeds". He is calling them to a change of heart and mind which will lead to a change in behaviour. You acknowledge, admit, confess, that you're doing something wrong which you need to stop doing, say you're sorry – do an about turn and start doing what's right. That's repentance.

Jeremiah's second point is a promise from God. "Repent and I will let you dwell in this place". Which probably means God will let them stay in the promised land if they will only admit that what they're doing is completely wrong. They can avert judgement, disaster, if they will only repent.

The third point is a warning against deception, This is the temple of the Lord – which is said three times for emphasis. They believe that they are safe as long as they have the temple of the Lord in their midst, worship at the temple and go through the motions of the services.

And just to make sure the people get the message, Jeremiah repeats his three key points but going into greater detail. You'll notice how important God views our relationship with those around us – how important it is that we actively look after the socially weak, immigrants, widows and orphans, not taking advantage and abusing the vulnerable to get what we want.

Jeremiah even says that the temple has become a den of thieves – words that Jesus himself repeated in Matthew 21:13 when he overturned the moneylenders' tables in the temple. This also reminds me of Fagin's kitchen in Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist. The boys are sent out to steal and bring their spoils back to the safety of the robbers' kitchen.

The people are behaving appallingly and then going to the temple, somewhere where they think they're safe. What about the priests, why aren't they doing anything about what's happening, why aren't they speaking up? Do the people naively think that God lives in the Temple so doesn't know what they're up to outside?

Not only are the people worshipping pagan gods they are involving the whole family so the idolatry will continue down the generations.

There are some expressions or words that are incredibly relevant to groups of people when no further comment or explanation is necessary. For example, 9/11, "I have a dream", "Does your dog bite?" which will be relevant if, like me, you're a Pink Panther fan. If you mention Shiloh to the Judeans, they know exactly what you mean. Shiloh – where the unthinkable happened. The Ark of the Covenant used to be kept at Shiloh and it was customary for the Israelites to make a pilgrimage there each year.

But then God reminds them that He didn't hesitate to let the tabernacle be destroyed and the ark of the covenant taken by the Philistines when the people treated it like a lucky charm by taking it with them into battle (1 Samuel 4:1-11).

Shiloh, previously the centre of their faith as Jerusalem was now, was calamitously destroyed – and God let it happen. Surely the unthinkable

couldn't happen again. Surely Jerusalem now the centre of the Jewish faith where God resided in the Temple, couldn't be overthrown as Shiloh had been. Go and take a look at Shiloh and remind yourselves what happened, God tells them. I let Shiloh be destroyed and the same can happen to Jerusalem and Judah.

Maybe this is a shock tactic to bring them to their senses. Is God going to send them into exile in Babylon just as the Northern Kingdom was taken away to Assyria? Is judgement inevitable? No – there's time for the people to repent and save themselves if only they will listen and mend their ways.

It is extraordinarily jarring for us to hear God tell Jeremiah not to pray – in fact this happens twice more in Jeremiah - in Chapter 11 verse 14 and Chapter 14 verse 11.

I think this reflects Jeremiah's relationship with God, sustained through prayer. God knows Jeremiah well enough to know that he will pray for the situation and I think what God is saying is, don't waste your breath because things have just got to change – they cannot stay as they are.

God is clearly very angry with the people of Judah – so angry, in fact, that he threatens them with terrible judgement. It's very hard for us to come to recognise such an angry, vengeful, jealous, wrathful God when we're much more comfortable with the image of Abba, Daddy – the God of love. But we also know that God is constant – he's the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Could God get as angry with us now? The answer, of course, is yes – he could! But the difference is Jesus. Jesus, our representative, the only one who could be guaranteed to keep our side of the Covenant with God – the one who takes the punishment for our sin in our place and enables us to have a relationship with God through him.

Do we have a right relationship with God? Do we have any false gods that we revere and trust that make us feel secure – like wealth or power – or do we fully trust in God for everything, for our security and sense of well-being. What about our relationship with others – not necessarily that we don't wrong them but that we show concern for them and do what we can to help them. For example, I'm thankful for the people at St Mary's who have made us aware of the Fairtrade movement, for people who have been lovingly serving the community in the current pandemic and being wonderful, caring neighbours, for the LoveFetcham initiative, for the community fridge, foodbanks, Besum, etc. So when

we talk about a right relationship with God and with other people what we're talking about is righteousness.

The Judeans went to temple services – so, if we go to church, or attend a virtual service, is that enough? We need to be authentic and sincere in our worship - not just go through the motions. We need to do everything we can to deepen our faith and grow closer to God.

I think it's really vital that we are honest with ourselves about ourselves. That we look into our own heart. Admitting that we've got things wrong, that we haven't behaved as we should, that we've let other goals, gods, get in the way of our relationship with God, that we've let ourselves and God down – and that isn't easy in our blame culture. We should regularly and repeatedly reflect on our behaviour and ask the Holy Spirit to help us recognise where we've fallen short, where we've sinned. And then come to God and ask for his forgiveness. It's important, too, that we fess up and apologise to people when we've behaved badly towards them – and, as Christians, we must forgive people who have wronged us. As we say in the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

The Judeans could have saved themselves and averted God's judgement upon them. We are saved through God's grace. Grace – God's rewards at Christ's expense.

Amen.

Bearing in mind that this sermon is entitled Repentance and we've been looking at how the Judeans brought disaster upon themselves through sin, I thought it would be appropriate for us to say together a prayer of repentance which will appear on the screen, after which we'll have a time of Reflection – after which Mary will lead us in our time of prayer.