

Jeremiah 23:9-18, 25-32

False Prophets

I don't know who to believe any more! I wonder if you've heard people saying that or maybe you've said it yourself. Truth can sometimes be elusive because issues are complicated and we just don't know enough to make a judgement. Sometimes we have different people telling us with equal certainty that the facts point us in the direction of their point of view; how do we know which to believe? We are probably used to thinking that dictatorial regimes control the news and only let their version of the truth be heard. But recent events in the USA have surely highlighted for us the seeming ease with which lies can become truth for those who want to believe them.

So how susceptible are we I wonder to untruth, to fake news, to scams, to clever advertising messages? And to move back into the world of Jeremiah, I wonder who we would have listened to if we had been the people of Judah, besieged by the Babylonians and in great danger?

Over the last couple of weeks, we have heard something of the sins the people of that land had fallen into, and from which they refused to repent. Last week Paul dealt with one key issue that God highlights throughout Jeremiah,-- idolatry, looking at how easy it seems for us to set up our own idols and allow them to have power over us.

Today we move to Jeremiah 23. Jeremiah for over 40 years was faithfully listening to God and proclaiming what God had told him to say. But over that same period, and before his time too, many others who were acknowledged as prophets by the King and the religious hierarchy and therefore by the people, were saying the exact opposite. And this chapter makes crystal clear what God thinks about these false prophets.

How must it have felt for Jeremiah to speak God's hard words year after year but to have those words ridiculed and totally refuted by those who should have been his co-workers in bringing God's word to the people. No wonder that he says in verse 9 that his heart is broken and his bones tremble.

What are God's accusations against these prophets? They can be broken down into two key areas, their characters and their message. And, of course, these are inextricably linked.

First their characters

They do not live lives which honour God; far from it.

They are ungodly, wicked men (vv11); they commit adultery and love dishonesty (vv14). They even act sinfully in the temple, the place of God's special holy presence, probably using the temple prostitutes. They use their power unjustly (vv10). They have authority because of who they are perceived to be, but they use this for their own ends. They are autocratic rather than being marked by humility in declaring God's word.

God says that the prophets of the northern kingdom were evil because they prophesied in the name of Baal. But these prophets are even worse because they pretend to speak in the name of Yahweh, the true God, but tell lies that deceive the people. And so, they are hypocrites, living a lie, their lives and what they say totally at variance with each other.

So secondly their message. If their characters are so far from what they should have been, is it any wonder their message also missed the mark in every respect. And the basic problem is starkly set out in vv18.

“Have any of these prophets been in the Lord's presence to hear what he is really saying? Has even one of them cared enough to listen?”

It seems that these prophets didn't feel the need to seek God; they assumed that what they were thinking was right. They were happy to tell everyone their dreams (vv25), no doubt seeming very spiritual as they did so, and say these came from God.

And the message they were proclaiming did not call people to repentance (vv14) but instead “they encourage those who are doing evil so that no-one turns away from their sins”. It is because of Jerusalem's prophets that wickedness has filled this land (vv15); what an indictment that is.

And what is the keynote of their messages purporting to come from God? Vv16/17 they fill the people with futile hopes. They assure the people that peace will come; that no harm will come their way; that the Lord will make it all come right, even though they continue to sin and do exactly as they like. They never face the people with the penalty of their actions.

Damning stuff. But, is it any wonder that they were listened to rather than Jeremiah. Because they were saying exactly what the people wanted to hear. Relax, it will be alright, not repent while you still have time. Just carry on worshipping as you have always done; the temple prostitutes are a great way

to come closer to God, rather than the challenge of holy living. I know it looks bad at the moment with the Babylonians at the door, but God will act for us, he won't let his temple be defiled; war will pass us by and we will have peace. It's clear what was the easier message to accept!

Before we move on to think of our own response to this passage, let's pose ourselves a question. Were the people of Judah absolved of their responsibilities to live rightly and listen to God, because the leaders they had were so deficient and their message though wrong was so clear and consistent with what nearly everyone was saying?

I think the answer must be no. The various leaders, including the prophets, held a weighty responsibility under God for their own actions, and they would pay the price of very particular judgements. In Jeremiah 28 we have the story of another false prophet, Hananiah, who dies because he speaks falsely in God's name and is accused by God of rebellion against Him. Leaders will have to account to God for their leadership, but we all have to account to God for our own actions.

It was in living memory after all, (during Jeremiah's time), that King Josiah had read the law of Moses to the people again, had reminded them of the covenant, had restored the proper festivals and sacrifices, had destroyed the altars of other gods and got rid of their priests. It was in living memory therefore that the people had promised to return to God and listen to his word.

But I also think vv29 is a key verse here. **“Does not my word burn like fire says the Lord? Is it not like a mighty hammer that smashes the rock to pieces?”** and in verse 28, can you not tell the difference between straw (or chaff) and grain?

In other words, the people should have been able to tell the difference between what was false and the true message of God through Jeremiah and other real prophets, because the word of the Lord is of a different nature and has a special power.

So, what does this passage say to us about what we listen to, what drives our own decisions and actions.

It's clear, isn't it, that the people were listening alright; they took the message of the false prophets fully on board, but it was the wrong message.

Today we are bombarded with messages of all kinds; through what we read, through television and the internet, through our friends and colleagues. This is a message-rich world, a world where, for many, the mobile phone is rarely out of the hands. So, as Christians, are we in danger of being most influenced in our everyday thoughts and actions by the prevailing culture, rather than what God is saying to us. That verse at the beginning of Romans 12 comes to mind.

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

It is so easy to absorb negative messages from the culture around us as if by osmosis. We don’t actually assent to what we are hearing but by repetition and all the techniques beloved of advertisers, particular messages somehow become normal or acceptable. But if we want to be controlled by God’s word as we live in today’s society, we cannot rely on osmosis, we have to actively listen to Him.

The wonderful news is that our God is a communicating God; he wants to speak to us and to listen to us. That huge privilege has been bought for us by our Lord Jesus on the cross. And we have the amazing example of Jesus who perfectly reflects for us what God is like and how to live Godly lives.

And we have the written word of God, Bibles in seemingly countless versions, with aids of all kinds to help us understand. And above all that, we have been given the Holy Spirit of God himself to live within us and to be our counsellor. Jesus promised his disciples in John 14:26: “But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you”.

And what God said about his word to the people of Judah is still true too. His word is like grain not chaff; in other words, it feeds us, it provides all we need to build us up so that we can live for Him. And it is still like a refining fire; it challenges and convicts us of our sin so that we can live holier lives which are more like Jesus. God’s word does not offer us cheap grace; salvation without repentance, love without justice, discipleship without discipline. And the word God is powerful, like that mighty hammer that smashes a rock to pieces. That might remind us of that verse in Hebrews 4:

“The word of the Lord is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing the soul and spirit, joint and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart”.

There is no doubt that God is speaking to us in all kinds of ways. The question is am I listening.

I think the keynote verse for me in this passage from Jeremiah is that verse 18. Let me remind us of it again:

“Have any of these prophets been in the Lord’s presence to hear what he is really saying? Has even one of them cared enough to listen?”

Shall we personalise that?

How much do I come into the Lord’s presence to hear what he is saying? Do I care enough to really listen?

I can tell you that I had to do lots of repenting as I pondered those questions. How important is God’s word to me really; where does it rank in my daily priorities? Am I expecting to hear from God as I go through my day? Can he use me because I am open to his promptings?

And, of course, as this passage makes clear, what we listen to and how we live are inextricably linked. If we want to live for God day by day, if we want to live holy lives, if we want to be guided into the acts God has prepared for us to walk in, if we want to know how to love people, to comfort people in any given situation, we need to be serious about listening to his voice.

And I’d like to finish with a picture which came to me as I was preparing. It is of ears blocked with wax. Perhaps the wax represents the stuff we take on board, either purposefully or by osmosis, which is unholy, discouraging, untrue, fear and anxiety-inducing. Aren’t there a lot of those kind of messages about? Sometimes for good reasons we take the weight of sorrow of the world on ourselves, unhelpfully, without letting God bear it with us. And that is perhaps particularly true in these covid times.

This wax, of whatever kind it is, can stop us from truly hearing God’s voice. But, you know, God has a very effective syringe and if we ask Him, he will use his living water to clear out the wax so that he can bring instead his encouragement, hope, the knowledge of how much we are valued and loved by Him and so that he can increase in us the desire to be in His holy presence, to hear his voice more and more. He longs to do that for each of us.