

Jeremiah 1

I wonder if you have ever been in a situation where you feel like nobody is listening to you. Several times now I have started speaking on a zoom meeting only to realise 'I'm still on mute' and I'm guessing that's been the case for many on this call today.

But I experienced it particularly on Christmas Eve when I took part in the doorstep carols initiative. As I stepped out of my doorway, I realised I was completely alone. Despite having put a flyer through every door of my road, no one was there. I heard some music playing from further up the road and wandered up to see what was going on. Someone had put the music of the carols on a speaker and two or three other folk were standing by their front doors singing. After a few minutes they went back inside their homes as it was getting cold. As I walked the length of the road back to my house I felt prompted to sing Silent Night just on my own. The more I realised people were not listening, the louder I sang. It was actually incredibly empowering, standing in the middle of the road, in the darkness on Christmas Eve singing Silent Night alone looking up at the night sky. I was incredibly sad that so few people had come to their doorsteps and it hadn't really been a success in my particular road BUT I had done what I had felt prompted to do by God.

Today we are launching our first sermon series of 2021 by delving into the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, the prophet. He is often referred to as the 'weeping prophet' and we shall discover why as we go through the chapters over the next few weeks.

Jeremiah would probably not be classed as a success in the world's eyes. For 40 years he served as God's spokesperson to Judah, but when Jeremiah spoke, no one listened. But God measures success in a very different way to that of the world. Our world measures success often in terms of financial and emotional security and of popularity. God's measure of success however, is about our faithfulness and obedience to him and for that we should see Jeremiah as a huge success.

After King Solomon died, Israel split into northern and southern kingdoms. Israel in the north and Judah in the south. During Solomon's reign the city of Jerusalem had been with centre of worship to Yahweh but since then a succession of kings had since reigned whose worship was divided between other gods. One king would take the people away from worshipping Yahweh then the next would

bring them back. It was a very chaotic time for Judah, morally, politically and spiritually and there were many evil practices taking place. Judah found itself in the middle of the triangle of the super powers of the day Babylon, Egypt and Assyria, all battling for world supremacy.

Jeremiah began his ministry during the reign of King Josiah.

Jeremiah's ministry was to warn Judah of God's judgment on them if they did not turn from their sins, his message was one of repentance. Stop doing what you are doing, stop worshipping false Gods, stop your evil and sinful ways and return to worshipping the God of Israel or calamity will befall you. Over the next few weeks' we shall be looking at Jeremiah's ministry but we shall also see his character and I pray God will show us how to develop our own character in the face of adversity as we witness Jeremiah's character developing too.

So let's start by looking this morning at Jeremiah's call by God, how he reacted and his first lessons in being a prophet.

Jeremiah tells us that the word of the Lord came to him saying; 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you. Before you were born you were set apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations'.

Jeremiah was born for a purpose. His purpose was to be a prophet. A prophet is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit to deliver a message. A prophet's job was to inspire action and change.

The problem for Jeremiah was that no one wanted to listen to his message and no one wanted to change.

And as Jeremiah receives the news that he is to be God's spokesperson, we hear his immediate reaction which is 'I don't know how to speak, I'm just a child'.

God doesn't rebuke Jeremiah but simply dismisses his point as true, because he was a young man, but irrelevant. What mattered wasn't Jeremiah's confidence or lack of it in himself, what mattered was God's confidence in him.

God knew Jeremiah's character because he had formed Jeremiah especially for this role, he knew that within Jeremiah there was as strength of character that would need developing yes, but it was there, it was present, perhaps for now as a small seed, but with God by his side, and plenty of experience, this strength of character would grow. He knew Jeremiah was a faithful and obedient man, and God had put his trust in him even before perhaps Jeremiah had put his trust in God.

In Rick Warren's best-selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, his very first sentence starts with 'it's not about you'. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God'.

You were born by his purpose and for his purpose.

Jeremiah, was born by God's purpose for God's purpose, and so were we. We may not have been called to be prophets, but we have each been called by God for His purposes and we too need to have confidence in God even when we don't have confidence in ourselves.

Jeremiah tries to get out of this new role but God says, I'm not having these excuses of being a child. You need to go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I tell you to.

Can you imagine for a moment, being told to go wherever you are sent and say whatever you are told to. Perhaps the nearest we have to that in terms of an occupation is that of the armed forces. Deployed wherever they are most needed to complete a task they are commanded to do. This too requires great obedience and faithfulness.

What we learn from Jeremiah as we often learn from many of those called by God is that he does not call the equipped he equips the called.

I wonder how many of us right now feel inadequate, not just for the roles we perhaps find ourselves in but inadequate to cope with what life is throwing at us. I think God is saying to us through Jeremiah's example is that no matter how we feel about ourselves, God sees us differently. We may not have much confidence in ourselves, but we don't need to, if we put our confidence in God.

We mustn't allow feelings of inadequacy to keep us from obeying God's call, God tells Jeremiah not to be afraid, because He is with him. This doesn't mean that Jeremiah's ministry is going to be plain sailing, in fact it's the opposite as we will see in future weeks but Jeremiah does fulfil his calling, because he continues to be obedient and faithful to God. God does not insulate us from hardship, he does not keep us from encountering the storm of this life, But He is there with us in the storms and in the hardship and right now, we have to keep hold of that thought.

Jeremiah has been appointed to root out some of the major issues going on in Judah. In order to be able to build and plant, he is going to first have to uproot and tear down. It's going to get worse before it can get better. There always needs to be a Good Friday before there can be an Easter Sunday. One commentator says 'God's purpose in history, ancient, modern or eschatological is that when God brings catastrophic endings it is to prepare the way for unimaginable new beginnings.

And then God commissions Jeremiah for the role he is to fulfil by touching his mouth and putting His words into Jeremiah's mouth. When people heard the words of Jeremiah, they heard the words of God.

He then gives Jeremiah what seems to be his first two lessons in prophecy. The Lord asks him 'what do you see Jeremiah'. It is interesting that Jeremiah's job is to speak but first God wants to know what can he see. Charles Spurgeon said 'before you can make an impression upon another person's heart, you must have an impression made upon your own soul'.

Jeremiah clearly sees an almond tree and perhaps he really was looking at an almond tree but God then attached a prophetic meaning to what he was seeing. It was well known that this particular tree known in Hebrew as wakeful, or the watcher tree, was the first to bud in spring. And God showed Jeremiah that so too, God is the divine watcher, keeping watch over his word. There would be many springs before the word would be fulfilled, but God was watching.

Again, God asks Jeremiah what does he see. This time he sees a boiling pot tilting away from the north. A sign that trouble is coming from the northern kingdoms, from Babylon especially. God would not only tolerate this he would summon it. This is a vivid picture of destruction and judgment being poured out on Judah from its enemies, where they will assume the reigns of the government and put the land under their laws.

The people of Judah had sinned greatly, they had continued time and time again to worship other Gods. God had commanded them specifically NOT to worship any god other than Him and they had ignored Him.

People today are still worshipping things other than God, we worship lifestyles, money, material possession, celebrity, idolatry is anything where we put something else above God in our order of priority. We need to be mindful that this kind of behaviour puts our heart where Judah's was.

We finish chapter 1 of Jeremiah with God telling him to get ready, to stand up and to stand up to those he is terrified of without delay or fear because God has made him like a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall. He is going to have to stand against the kings, the priests, the officials and all the people of the land. I wonder if Jeremiah actually felt like a fortified city at that particular moment or whether he took a large gulp and wondered why on earth God had chosen him for this role. As one commentator puts it 'to this thin-skinned young man, his description in terms of battlements and heavy metal might have seemed a wild exaggeration, but in fact it proved an understatement. Jeremiah would hold out against all comers for over 40 years, outdoing any fortress under siege, and his strength would not be the inert solidity of iron, but the courage of a frail man's hard-won convictions.

Right now, life may well feel like being in a battle, but God is with us in that battle. He knows our hearts, he knows our disappointments, he knows our feelings of inadequacy, our fears and our worries and I believe he says to us just the same as he said to Jeremiah 'I know you and I am with you'. For Jeremiah and for us, God's general pattern is not to stop the fight but to stand by the fighter. Our battles may not be entirely the same as Jeremiah's, but the journey we are on right now is one where strength of character, endurance and trust in God will be needed maybe like never before.

As we travel through Jeremiah over the next few weeks, we will see God's faithfulness to this young man who has put his trust in the one who called him, may we too put our trust in the one who calls us.

Amen