**14th February 2016**

**Jeremiah 31 and 32**

Jim asked his friend, Tony, whether he had bought his wife anything for Valentine's Day.'Yes,' came the answer from Tony who was a bit of a chauvinist, 'I've bought her a belt and a bag.'

'That was very kind of you,' Jim added, 'I hope she appreciated the thought.'

Tony smiled as he replied, 'So do I, and hopefully the vacuum cleaner will work better now.

Roger, who was 19 years old, was buying an expensive bracelet, to surprise his girlfriend on Valentine's Day, at a very smart jeweller's shop in Hatton Garden, London.

The jeweller inquired, 'Would you like your girlfriend's name engraved on it?'

Roger thought for a moment, grinned, then answered, 'No, instead engrave "To my one and only love".' The jeweller smiled and said, 'Yes, sir; how very romantic of you.'

Roger retorted with a glint in his eye, 'Not exactly romantic, but very practical. This way, if we break up, I can use it again.'

What would you get your partner on Valentine’s Day. A dilemma I’m sure most of you ignore. But let me entertain you with some suggestions from Cosmopolitan’s perfect Valentines gifts for him:

Champagne may be romantic but Beer is his true bubbly of choice. Any beer gift will do.

He’ll never redeem a Spa Gift card but every dude has got to shave. Or not shave. Either way facial hair grooming is one constant in a man’s grooming life. If only the same could be said for nose hair trimming.

No sweet floral scents only rugged woodsy smells will do. The Feu du Bois candle is the ultimate man scent gift. Not only does it smell like a campfire at midnight but the canister is so huge he can use it for trash afterwards and even his garbage will smell appealing and manly.

Don’t think hearts think blood. It’s not hearts that will set a man’s pulse racing. It’s the stuff inside them – the blood. Specifically, spilling of said blood. Virtually that is, on video games.

Ladies, it’s not too late to get that perfect gift for your man.

Today is the day of love and our bible passage is about love. God’s relentless and pursuing love for his people. That love is expressed in the buying of a special gift for the people of God.

This month we have been looking at the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is commonly known as the "weeping prophet," based on his wish to have a "fountain of tears" with which he might weep for the sins of his own people (9:1). He has deep empathy and love for those he continually criticizes. But in these chapters, one finds more than tears, more than frank admissions of pain, and more than convictions about the evils of his people, the nation of Judah. One also finds startling promises of hope, hope found not merely in the possibility of human repentance, but grounded squarely in the amazing grace and love of God. Such a passage is 31:27-34 and the actions Jeremiah takes as a consequence of this prophecy in chapter 32.

First of all chapter 31 and the promise of a new covenant. It is an iconic biblical passage. The very language of this promised "new covenant" lent its name to what we call the New Testament.

What has happened up till now is that Jeremiah has predicted that the nation of Judah will be destroyed because of their faithlessness and waywardness. God has been watching as they have been uprooted, torn down, overthrown, destroyed and had disaster brought upon them. The time is nearly 600 years before the birth of Jesus and the people of Judah, the southern half of present day Israel, has been attacked and will be conquered by the Babylonians. Thousands will die and Jerusalem will be destroyed and left in ruins.

Jeremiah now hears God say something quite different. In that wasted land God will now "sow humans and animals," repopulating a place made empty by human rejection of God (see 4:22). And, at last, Jeremiah is able to announce the final word of God given to him at his initial call. When God called him, he received a six-fold task, to "pluck up and pull down," to "destroy and overthrow," and "to build and to plant." He has spent the bulk of his prophetic career announcing the former four demands, but now can turn to the latter two.

Furthermore, God announces that the divine task is still to "watch." God is still watching over Israel, but now  "to build and to plant." As a sign of that divine watching, no longer will Israel have to suffer as a result of the sins of their ancestors; they will all now be judged only on their own behaviours. The famous proverb ("The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge") no longer applies to Israel.[[1]](#endnote-1)

It is always tempting to blame your parents for how you turn out. Sometimes you may have good reason – but Jeremiah declares that each generation stands before God responsible for their own destiny and how they respond to God. You are not trapped by your past unless you allow the past to trap you.

Jeremiah announces that God will make a new Covenant with his people. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people...for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. (Jeremiah 31: 33, 34b).

Reverend Lia Scholl[[2]](#endnote-2) is an American pastor who ministers to women in the sex industry. Commenting on this text she likens the relationship of God to the people of Israel like a wife to a wayward husband who has affairs and hooks up with prostitutes.

When a spouse is unfaithful to his or her spouse, over and over again, should the injured spouse continue to pursue the adulterer? She says ‘ I hear, in my mind, the countless number of women I’ve counselled who are dating or married to men who are abusive and unfaithful. “But I loooove him!”

Does love abide? And should it?

Quite often scripture employs this colourful metaphor of a spouse cheating on their partner. The partenr is faithful and loving but the spouse is faithless and strays. God is faithful to us but we are faithless. We flit in and out of devotion to God. We get caught up with other loves, we devote ourselves to other passions. We are not all that interested in a committed relationship with God. We play at it.

For Jeremiah, Israel has turned away from God, and they are worshipping idols and false gods. In addition, Israel is not doing the things that make Israel special—they are not treating the foreigners with kindness, they are not caring for the widows and orphans. Jeremiah clearly thinks that Israel is a bad spouse.

Let’s face it. Marriage is hard.

And all of us have heard about spouses that care more about themselves than they do about their partner. There’s the husband who cheats because it feels good in the moment. There’s the wife who spends irresponsibly, because her immediate wants are more important than anything else.

It’s really difficult to put your spouse’s needs and wants ahead of your own.

Over and over again, Israel takes care of Israel’s needs. Leaving God as the spouse whose job it is to satisfy Israel. There’s no partnership here.

But why would God continue to pursue this unfaithful spouse?

In some way, Jeremiah’s job is to set the boundaries for Israel. Jeremiah is saying to Israel, “Because you acted as you did, God is negating the current covenant.” But instead of divorce, God is looking for a reconciliation. God is suggesting a new covenant.

When God talks about putting the law on the people’s hearts, do you think God is talking about winning the love of Israel? Do you think that maybe God is going to wooIsrael? Make Israel fall in love with God so much that Israel can’t be unfaithful, because Israel is so full of love?

Marriage is about making a choice, everyday, to do the right thing by your spouse, because you’re motivated by love. Not only the passion of love, but also the steadfast action of love.

Is that what the new covenant will be?

With humans, the love of God would seem more like neediness and desperation. But God’s love isn’t like our love. From God, this love is noble, expansive and boundless. That’s not the same as boundary-less.

If you were God, would you try again with Israel?

The gospel is that God always tries gain with us. God continues to love us even though we don’t love him.

Gray Strutt has designed a beautiful cross for our new chapel made of sticks. He wrote this to me:

**A**s I began to arrange the sticks into crosses I became aware that I was choosing mainly the damaged and the flawed sticks, partially to reflect the imperfections of the first who were called to become disciples, but then none of us are qualified, none of us without fault, ‘there is no one ri**ghteous**, not even one’, (Romans 3:10) and I know just how far short I come. But we are all tied into the Promise of the Cross, not by our own efforts but because of the love of the one who paid the price. And then I searched out the broken sticks even more to reflect that. The more broken, the more I chose them. ‘On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17)

The human condition means that many of us are broken by our “upbringings, our cultures and our times.” That we get broken, and which means that we then go break those around us.

Sydney Harris, wrote the Seven Magic Words. “See him as the child he was.” Harris continues, “Remember that he began his life with laughing expectancy, with trust, with warmth, desiring to give love and to take love.

“And then remember that something happened to him – something he is not aware of – to turn the trust into suspicion, the warmth into wariness, the give-and-take into all-take and no give.

See him as the child he was. God sees us as the child we were.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, is the tattoo-having, curse-word-saying pastor of the Church of All Saints and Sinners in the States. she writes, “It has been my experience that what makes us saints of God is not our ability to be saintly but rather God’s ability to work through sinners. We may be sinners. But God’s love makes us saints’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

So, in the spirit and the promise of the future, realising deeply the love of God for his people, Jeremiah goes and buys a gift to symbolise that love. It is not flowers, or chocolates. It is not jewellery or a romantic meal. Jeremiah buys land; land where houses and fields and vineyards will, yet again, flourish.

This is not the time to buy real estate. This is not the time to buy land and property. This is in the middle of a war when the country is being devastated. But Jeremiah has hope that God still loves this people and has a future for them. He invests in that future.

It’s a crazy thing to do. It’s a bit like buying a plot of land in the middle of Aleppo, Syria. At the darkest time possible Jeremiah is saying that, because of the love of God, there is always hope.

In January of 1943, three months before he was arrested and subsequently killed by the Nazis, the  Lutheran Pastor and Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected on this passage from Jeremiah and wrote these words about Christian hope and faith when times are dark. He wrote:

"...There remains for us only the very narrow way, often extremely difficult to find, of living every day as if it were our last, and yet living in faith and responsibility as though there were to be a great future. It is not easy to be brave and keep that spirit alive, but it is imperative."*[[4]](#endnote-4)*

Now if we were to find ourselves in a prison cell, alone, waiting for our impending death, with war and social upheaval raging outside the prison walls, what would be our word to the world? What would we do as a testimony to the world that the darkness of the times was not going to prevail? What would we do to inspire future generations? In regard to these questions, it is clear that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had much in common with the Prophet Jeremiah.

It is not the time to invest in the future. It is a time to panic about the present. War is raging. Terror is threatened on all sides. Exile is coming. For Israel the future looks bleak.

But Jeremiah doesn't watch the News. Jeremiah doesn't listen to the prophets of doom on talk radio. Jeremiah knows that neither King Zedekiah, nor Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, nor corporate executives or Government officials, none of these really run the world. Jeremiah knows that it is God who runs the world. It is God who gets the final word and God's final word is not destruction. God's final word is never destruction. God's final word is renewal. God's final word is always renewal.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in prison, he wrote a letter to his fiancée Maria von Wedemeyer. He wrote:

"When Jeremiah said, in his people's hour of direst need, that 'houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land', it was a token of confidence in the future. Our marriage must be a 'yes' to God's earth. It must strengthen our resolve to do and accomplish something on earth."*[[5]](#endnote-5)*

Bonhoeffer's words, inspired by the prophet Jeremiah, are as true today as they ever were. We live in a world where the bad news of the day is both a source of despair, and in our 24-hour news cycle, a source of entertainment. We are tempted to react to the tragedies and social unrest of our day with either a self-absorbed denial or a self-absorbed hedonism.

Thomas Warren writes: The people who have Jeremiah as their prophet, the people who have Jesus as their Saviour, the people who have Dietrich Bonhoeffer as their martyr, the people who know that the God of the Bible is the source of their lives, these people do not despair. These people do not live lives of denial. These people do not live lives of hedonism. These people live lives of radical hope. A hope, which is not simply some sentimental feeling, but a hope and an orientation which is a commitment to action; an orientation which allows us to see the world differently and to bring that hope-filled vision to life.

 We in the church are those people! We are the ones who have been called by our baptism to bring hope to the world. We are the ones challenged to buy land when all the "experts" of the world say "not now" - "The market is not good" - " You would be foolish to buy now."

The Jesuit Priest and modern-day prophet Daniel Berrigan reminds us of the critical importance of Jeremiah's field. Berrigan writes:

"Jeremiah's field collapses time; it symbolizes promise, and gift, and an entire land restored. Is the land blood-ridden and desolate now? Perhaps, but it shall be again a land flowing with milk and honey." [[6]](#endnote-6)

Jeremiah says to us today, buy the land, build up the church, build up God's kingdom, build up God's reign of justice and righteousness and peace. Invest in and prepare the ground for the future. Show the world that God's spirit is alive and well here on earth. Indeed the future of our lives, the future of our churches, the future of our world is not pre-determined; the future hangs in the balance.  And God calls the church to make an investment in that future.

No matter the cost, no matter the risk, no matter the bad news of the day, may we, the church of Jesus Christ, have the courage and strength and faith at this time to make that investment![[7]](#endnote-7)

God is love: there is always hope.

1. <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Weeping-Prophet-Reflections-on-Jeremiah> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rev. Lia Scholl serves as pastor at the Richmond Mennonite Fellowship in Richmond, Virginia and is a sex work ally, a Board member at the [Red Umbrella Project](http://redumbrellaproject.org/).  <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/yearb/lent5ot/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.liascholl.com/saints-and-sinners/> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison (Enlarged Edition; London: SCM Press, 1971), 14-15 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and M. von Wedemeyer, Love Letters from Cell 92, 1943-45 (ed. Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and U. Kabitz; London; Harper Collins, 1994), 48-49 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Daniel Berrigan, Jeremiah: The World, the Wound of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 141 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Rev Thomas Warren : <http://day1.org/2197-when_battered_and_besiegedbuy> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)