**21st February 2016**

**Jeremiah 36**

Words are important and words matter.

The deal David Cameron stuck with the EU : will it be good enough to convince the British public that the EU is being reformed. Will anyone be bothered with the wording and the intricacies of the EU or just vote with their gut attitude – are we British or European?

The pope got into trouble this week for questioning the Christian faith of US Presidential candidate Donald Trump. Trump wants to build a wall between the US and Mexico to stop illegal Mexican immigrants. The Pope said Trump’s views are not Christian – Christians want to build bridges not walls. The Pope’s words were misheard by Trump (surprise, surprise) as though Trump was not a Christian instead of what he actually said – Trump’s views were not Christian. The letter ‘a’ makes a big difference. But trump got all angry saying it was outrageous for anyone to judge another person’s faith as if the Pope was questioning whether he was ‘a’ Christian rather then whether his views were Christian.

"If you 'steal' a kiss, it's not a crime", was an attempt by the Twitter account of the Spanish National Police Corps, @policia, to sound romantic on Valentine's Day.

It's an official account with a reputation for funny, light-hearted tweets - and two million followers. But on this occasion, people online interpreted the tweet as implying that it's ok to kiss someone without their consent.

Fifteen hours later, this had attracted over 2,500 retweets with some saying that it appeared to condone sexual harassment. The flood of tweets criticising the original post led the Spanish police to post a second message, clarifying the original, which read: "If your loved one steals a kiss from you by surprise, enjoy it! If someone steals a kiss from you without consent, report it!"

Our instantaneous world encourages us to make immediate response which can often be ill thought through and can aggravate the situation. In the old days you would sit down with a pen in your hand and draft a letter. Then read it through to yourself and maybe share it with some you trusted before you then were happy for it to be sent. Now we live in the perils of quick emails that can be misunderstood and once you hit send there is no way of getting them back and no way of controlling where they go and to how many people they are distributed to.

The written word used to be a reliable form of communication because you had to engage brain before you sent it. Now you can send and then repent at leisure.

Our bible reading today is about the written word. The word of prophecy given by Jeremiah to the kings and rulers of Judah at the time of their downfall around 600 years before the birth of Christ. This passage speaks of the power of the written word, the power of the Word of God, but the challenge of whether we listen to it or not.

Just to recap – we have been looking at the book of Jeremiah this month. The book concerns itself with the events surrounding the downfall of Judah and culminating with its destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 587 BC. In his book ‘To Pluck Up, To Tear Down’ Walter Brueggemann[[1]](#endnote-1) claims that this crisis is the dominant and shaping event of the entire Old Testament’. Certainly the downfall of Judah seems to jeopardize God’s covenant promise of land and people to his chosen people. It seems that the unique relationship between God and his people may have come to an end. Two weeks ago we looked at Jeremiah’s image of the potter and the clay and his view that promises can be changed, can be amended like a potter may have to do if he finds the clay resistant to being shaped in the direction the potter wants. Jeremiah’s message challenges Judah not to think that because God has made promises they can do what they want.

A new and powerful threat has emerged on the scene: Babylon. This menacing super power has already captured the northern kingdom of Israel and was now in a position to take over the southern kingdom of Judah, the last remnant of the once great Jewish nation. Historians may simply see these events as a result of competing political and military entities but Jeremiah views them from the standpoint of a mistaken theology. According to Jeremiah, Israel and Judah have failed to keep covenant with God. They have ignored their God given responsibilities to do justice and instead do whatever they please; all the while counting on God to protect them should they be into trouble. Of course they do get into trouble – with God – and it falls to Jeremiah to point out the error of their ways. Jeremiah announces God’s judgement to the people in general, and to the various rulers of the court and temple specifically. He keeps on doing it. A bit like the preacher who got criticised for only preaching essentially the same sermon. He said ‘when they’ve taken note of that one I’ll preach a new one’.

But Jeremiah’s announcements fall on deaf ears, in part because of the commonly held belief that God had made certain irrevocable promises to the monarchy, to the temple and to Judah guaranteeing their safety and security. Jeremiah challenges this belief and calls over and over again from Judah to repent and return to God and covenant keeping as the only possible means of avoiding a repeat of history: exile, death and destruction.

Chapters 36 – 39 (and we’ll pick up chapter 38 next week) provide the setting for Jeremiah’s work. They show us the problems confronting Judah and Jeremiah’s role in identifying and explaining the problems. They are pivotal for understanding how the prophecies of Jeremiah were written down and understood as the word of God. And they show us how the word of God functions in both the downfall of Judah and in her life of exile and in our life today.

Among other things, chapter 36 provides us with a behind the scenes look at Bible making. Here we see something unique in all of scripture, namely, the story of how God‘s word comes to Jeremiah with the instruction to have all that God says recorded on a scroll so that ‘perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, they will each turn from their wicked ways; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin’ (verse 3)

Here we see the transition from oral spoken prophecy to written prophecy. This written word, this ‘Bible’ if you will, emerges in the midst of a major social upheaval, and it does so with the expressed purpose of moving Judah to repentance. In other words, this written word, like the oral renderings of the word before it, is designed to transform and renew life. It is intended to be read and heard in and among the people of God so that, together, they might find their way back into God’s favour and thus be spared the pain of exile.

When we used to write letters many of them were keep sakes. I remember having just met Debbie and feeling there was, should we say, a spark. But almost immediately I went off to Africa for the summer to a mission college. In the days before the internet and emails and skyping, we were reliant on air mail that usually took over a week to get to your destination, particularly if it was somewhere remote in developing country. I used to wander down to the mail box every day hoping I’d have a letter from this girl. I sent her a number, I must add. Unfortunately quite a lot of them were delivered all at once which may have given the impression that I was a bit desperate and over keen (which in truth I was). We’ve still got those early letters. They are keepsakes. The bible in many ways is love letters to us. Communication from the past about God’s saving work and the love He has for humanity. Pouring over those letters can hopefully remind us of our relationship and rekindle the spark.

Sadly for many in our society the Bible has been discredited. The contemporary agenda of equality and anti-discrimination has focused on those contentious passages in scripture connected to women and homosexuality and has led to a discrediting of the whole of scripture in the attitude of many. This has led to an ignorance of its core message and wisdom.

But when you take the time to write you can express yourself and think through stuff. If you write an academic paper or thesis, every word is measured and there for a reason. Some people when they are angry take up their pen and express their anger and their emotions. Getting it down in writing can allow them to stand back and be objective. Have they got a case? Is their anger fair or is it all self-centred and biased? You can see what you have written and study it.

I had a woman in my former church who came to me one day burdened with guilt. For 20 years she had carried the shame of having had an abortion. At the time she already had two young children and had found motherhood a nightmare. Post-natal depression had made her suicidal. Her husband gave little support, being out early in the morning and back late at night believing he had a duty to be the bread winner. The children just drove her mad. Now she had made a mistake with her birth control and accidentally got herself pregnant and couldn’t face the prospect of another child so had it terminated. She had felt guilty ever since.

She had lived with the consequences of that guilt and in response to a recent sermon on forgiveness she now asked for my help. We went through what was written in scripture about God’s promises to those who confess their sin and guilt and repent to know his forgiveness and cleansing. But I suggested that was only one way. To make that confession perhaps she needed to write a letter to God explaining why she did what she did and how she has felt about it ever since. She found that exercise liberating as if it was her thought- through prayer and honest petition to God. When she was ready she burnt the letter as a symbol of God’s purifying fire and forgiveness. There is something powerful about the written word.

Following God’s instructions, Jeremiah enlists the aid of a scribe Baruch to write down the prophecies God gives to him. He then instructs Baruch to go to the temple, from which Jeremiah has been banned from entering, and to read the word of God to the assembled people. Baruch dutifully follows Jeremiah’s instructions. Apparently, some of the gathered officials were so taken with this word from the Lord that they took it upon themselves to share it with the king.

The scene quickly shifts to the king, who is cold and calculating in his contempt for this word from the Lord. Sitting in front of is fireplace, the king begins cutting the scroll into small pieces with his knife, and then he throws the pieces into the fire. After engaging in this early form of ‘document shredding’, the king then issues an arrest warrant of both Jeremiah and Baruch. But he Lord hid them (verse 26b).

There is great irony in what happens next. God commands a second scroll to be made following the same process as the first one. Only this time ‘many similar words were added to them’ (verse 32b). By refusing to listen to the word of God ‘the king eventually brings about a situation in which a far greater number both of his and of succeeding generations become hearers of the word. So instead of destroying the word of God, the king’s calculated actions give rise to even more words from God.

The transition from oral or written prophecy prompts a whole new perspective on the mind and will of God. It gave rise to a wide ranging body of literature that provides, first to Judaism and later to the church, new insights into the nature and being of God. But as Brueggemann maintains ‘scroll making is a daring, dangerous enterprise. It is a way in which God counters human pretension and resistance. God will not leave the king scrolless, even if the king does not want a scroll’.[[2]](#endnote-2) Because it was and is, God’s word, and because as Isaiah says, ‘the word of our God will stand forever’ (Is 40.8) it is reproduced and added to so that more and more people, along with the king, can come to know what God desires from them.

Even those contentious passages in scripture bring us up sharp and make us think through our actions and attitudes. They counter our pretensions and arrogance.

As we know from our society: the word may be there but no one wants to listen. The description of king Jehoiakim’s response should be compared with that of King Josiah when the Book of the law was found during temple clearing operations. Josiah hears the word and tears his clothes in repentance but Jehoiakim is unmoved and has the scroll torn up. Josiah embarks of social and religious reform. Jehoiakim heads off to destruction.

A wise leader considers the advice of others. The greater the leader’s power, the more important it is to be open to correction. Some leaders are authoritarian and see any questioning of their policy as rebellion or treachery. Early last century the Duke of Wellington who had been a successful general became Prime Minister. He recorded his account of his first day I office: ‘I met my cabinet for the first time this morning and gave them my instructions. The most extraordinary thing happened: they started to discuss them!’ I’m sure David Cameron is having that problem now over Europe.

Authoritarianism can be common in church circles as it is in politics and business. Leaders can insist on their own ideas and make decisions without reference to others, but in the long run they will greatly weaken their effectiveness. Openness to new ideas and to correction is invaluable.

Jehoiakim is not open to the word of God. By the end of the chapter the last chance is thrown away. Jehoiakim may think he is putting an end to Jeremiah’s message but in fact he is putting an end to Jerusalem and his own family. The progress to judgement is now inevitable. He has gone too far.

The invitation of the Christian message is an invitation to forgiveness and fellowship with God – to be reconciled – to know the love of the heavenly father. It is for all people and God would like all o accept it and be transformed by that knowledge: that we are not in this world just for ourselves. We are called into partnership with God for the wellbeing of the whole of creation. Of course we need to take responsibility for our lives and flourishing but we also need to take care of the planet and our neighbours. At the heart of all that is our relationship with our creator.

But there is a cutting edge of the Christian message, for God respects the freedom he has given us. He respects the freedom we have to shred his word and burn it up and ignore it. But if we will not have God then will God finally have us? If we persist in rejecting God’s invitation will the time come when God confirms that decision?

We may rightly turn away from some of the ideas of revenge and divine retribution hell fire and all that and their presentation by our Christian ancestors – depictions that seem a long way from the approach of Jesus. But the whole of scripture, the written word of God, suggest the possibility that people may fail to receive what God would love to give them. If that happens it is not God’s fault but theirs. We are not judges, but our ministry, like Jeremiah’s is to faithfully to witness to such a possibility – that the Gospel does matter and that what we do with God is life’s most pressing question. We should weep when people tear up that question and burn it in the fire.

Pray God would continue to speak his word into our nation and pray we may have hearts and minds to receive it.

1. W Brueggemann, To Pluck Up to Tear Down, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988 p 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. W Brueggemann, *To Build to Plant*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991 p 137-138 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)