**28th February 2016**

**Jeremiah 38**

There is a saying that ‘courage is fear that has said its prayers’. Courage is fear that has said its prayers.

As we come to the end of our look at the book of Jeremiah we have a story where Jeremiah shows once again his courage in the face of opposition and threats to his life.

It is 500 years before the birth of Christ and the Babylonian army has surrounded Jerusalem. King Zedekiah the king of Juda is holed up in the city and is having a hard time holding together the vestiges of his little kingdom. Jeremiah is making it harder. Jeremiah simply tells the King he should surrender to the Babylonians, which Jeremiah knows is the only way forward and he believes is God’s word. Many of the citizens of Jerusalem have already faced facts and gone over to the Babylonians. Zedekiah can picture the treatment he’ll get from his own citizens who have seen the light before him and won’t be so impressed when he eventually joins them.

Jeremiah’s message is not welcome. He is deemed to be a traitor and unpatriotic.

Many people from time to time get denounced as traitors and being unpatriotic. I read the story of Yulia Stepanova the other day. She is the Russian athlete who secretly recorded footage of her fellow Russian athletes confessing to doping and blew the whistle to German TV. Russia has consequently been banned from international athletics. She now has to live in Germany and is banned from seeing her family in Russia. She is a prisoner and doesn’t feel 100% safe anymore. It is the price for honesty and bravery.

Likewise Edward Snowden has been variously called a hero, a whistle-blower, a dissident, a patriot, and a traitor. His disclosures about spying from British centres like GCHQ at Cheltenham and their co-operation with the CIA have fuelled debates over mass surveillance, government secrecy, and the balance between national security and information privacy. Snowden is in hiding in Russia at the moment.

On the personal scale we may find ourselves at work in comprising situations where we are being asked or expected to do practices which we know are either unlawful or harmful to others. Do we blow the whistle?

It takes courage.

I was reading the other day about the life of Peter Tatchell, the Human Rights Campaigner. At the age of 11 he saw a news report about racist violence in Alabama and that moment spurred him into a life of activism. He has been beaten up 300 times and had 50 bricks thrown through his windows. He has been most active in gay Rights walking into the fire in places such as Africa and Russia.

Yet he is courageous enough to change his mind and even defy his own supporters. The ongoing controversy over Asher’s bakery in Northern Ireland is a case in point. In brief: a bakery refused to ice a sentence on to a cake that was pro-gay marriage. Gareth Lee the customer took it to court with Tatchell’s support and the bakers were found guilty of discrimination. The case then went to appeal and two days before it was heard Tatchell changed his mind and came out in favour of the bakery. He felt it was important to take a stand in defence of freedom of conscience, expression and belief. He knew there was pros and cons on all sides but felt it important to err on the side of freedom. ‘Free speech’ he said ‘is one of the most important and precious of all human rights.’ Yet Tatchell has been called a traitor by his own gay rights activists.

Whatever you make of Peter Tatchell, and I’ve heard him speak on a number of occasions, you have to admire his courage and conviction.

Likewise you need to admire Jeremiah's courage.

The word jeremiad means a doleful and thunderous denunciation, and its derivation is no mystery. There was nothing in need of denunciation that Jeremiah didn't denounce. He denounced the king and the clergy. He denounced recreational sex and extramarital jamborees. He denounced the rich for exploiting the poor, and he denounced the poor for deserving no better. He denounced the way every new god that came sniffing around had them all after him like bees around honey; and right at the very gates of the Temple he told them that if they thought God was impressed by all the mumbo-jumbo that went on in there, they ought to have their heads examined.[[1]](#endnote-1)

When some of them took to indulging in a little human sacrifice on the side, he appeared with a clay pot, which he smashed into smithereens to show them what God planned to do to them as soon as he got around to it. He even denounced God for saddling him with the job of trying to reform such a pack of hyenas, degenerates, and mobsters. "You have deceived me," he said, shaking his fist. You are "like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail" (Jeremiah 15:18), and God took it.

But the people didn't. When he told them that the Babylonians were going to come in and rip them to shreds as they richly deserved, they worked him over and threw him in jail.

When the Babylonians did come in and not only ripped them to shreds but tore down their precious Temple and ran off with all the expensive hardware, he told them that since it was God's judgment upon them, they better submit to it or else. To the people of Judah all their patriotic instincts made that sound like the worst kind of defeatism and treachery, whereupon they threw him into an open cistern that happened to be handy. Luckily the cistern had no water in it, but Jeremiah sank into the muck up to his armpits and stayed there till an Ethiopian eunuch pulled him out with a rope.

The book of Jeremiah affirms two points. On the one hand those who follow the Lord faithfully can expect harsh treatment from His opponents. If you stand up against malpractice, if you testify as a whistle-blower, you will get opposition from the vested interests you come against.

On the other hand God can be trusted to protect his servants. There is a tension here inevitably. As it happened earlier in chapter 26, Jeremiah’s life is spared but not without some pain and suffering. The passage here affirms both God’s protective care and provision for Jeremiah, in his rescue from the cistern, but also the hostility he faces, without concluding how the relationship between these principles will be worked out.

Because of Jesus, the resurrection and Life, we have a fresh perspective on all our struggles in this life, with a belief in a life beyond this one. But within this life there still remains a tension. There is real opposition to Christianity in some parts of the world. In some countries that is very explicit, in other countries it is more subtle. Where there is hostility there are also accounts of God’s protection. Christians who have been through great hardship and even torture will often bear witness that their awareness of God’s love and care was greater in their difficulties than they had ever known before. In the middle of opposition the protection of God is clearly experienced.

Perhaps the defining image of the past year has been that of the refugee. Their images fill the news reports, huddled into perilously overcrowded boats, eking out an existence in refugee camps, desperately queuing at border posts, or trudging across dusty plains carrying the fragments of their lives in plastic bags.

And darker, even more shocking images: toddlers lying lifeless on Turkish beaches; desperate captives, kneeling at the feet of their black-clad executioners.

Our impression of the refugee crisis is largely defined by events in the Middle East. Yet the truth is that this is a global phenomenon. Throughout the world, people are on the move – and millions of them are Christians.

[**Syria**](http://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/worldwatch/syria.php) is the 'largest displacement crisis globally' according to the UN. More than half the Syrian population have left their homes; 7.6 million are internally displaced within the country, and 4 million are refugees outside it. Before the war there were some 1.8 million Christians in Syria; now best estimates stand at between 700,000 and 800,000.

Most of Syria's refugees have ended up in refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan. But many Christians fear to go into the camps where, in the words of one, 'we are still a vulnerable minority in a very dangerous place'.

"You flee to survive and keep your children safe, but that is just as hard in the camps," said a father in a refugee camp in Lebanon talking to the Open Door Charity. "It can be tough to find enough to eat and also to stop undesirables preying particularly on our young daughters."

Refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) lose so much: their homes, jobs, communities, possessions - even their sense of status and identity. But the one thing they dare not lose is hope.

As one of the 120,000 Iraqi Christians who fled from the Nineveh plain said: "Yes, we have to cope with the trauma of leaving, and sometimes with the dreadful things we have seen, but the hardest thing I find is to keep hope alive that we will ever return – if you feel despair about the future then it is very hard to find the motivation to survive."

Courage is fear that has said its prayers.

Contrast the courage of Jeremiah to that of King Zedekiah. Zedekiah’s faith is one that hopes for the best but refuses to face reality. He asks for Jeremiah’s prayers but refuses to listen to what Jeremiah actually says. He tries to please everyone and ends up pleasing no one. He fears the members of his government more than the message of Jeremiah and allows them to dictate what happens. He surrenders his responsibility to others, being himself too frightened to lead. He lacked conviction. He ends up fleeing when the Babylonians sack the city of Jerusalem only to be captured and see his sons slaughtered before his eyes, before his own eyes are gouged out and he is sent off into exile. He should’ve submitted like Jeremiah told him to.

Sometimes, no matter how optimistic and hopeful you are – you need to face reality. I’m sure Zedekiah prayed for years for God to give him victory over the Babylonians. But no victory came. God had other ideas.

The nation of Judah is fractured by this war. Many are captured and exiled into Babylon. Other splinter groups go off into the countryside to vie for areas of control after the collapse of a central power. Many run off as refugees to other lands.

Jeremiah has told them that, Babylonian occupation or no Babylonian occupation, they should stick around so that someday they could rise up and be a new nation again; and then the first chance they get, a bunch of them beat it over the border into Egypt. What's even worse, they dragged old Jeremiah, kicking and screaming, along with them, which seems the final irony: that he, who had fought so long and hard against all forms of idolatry—the nation as idol, the Temple as idol, the king as idol—should at last have been tucked into their baggage like a kind of rabbit's foot or charm against the evil eye or idol himself.

What became of him in Egypt afterward is not known, but he leaves a legacy of courage in the face of opposition.

I came across the story of Terri Roberts this week.

Once a week, Terri Roberts spends time with a 13-year-old Amish girl named Rosanna who sits in a wheelchair and eats through a tube. Roberts bathes her, sings to her, reads her stories. She can only guess what's going on inside Rosanna's mind because the girl can't talk.

Roberts' son did this to her.

Seven years ago, Charles Carl Roberts IV barricaded himself inside an Amish schoolhouse near Lancaster, Pennsylvania in the USA tied up 10 girls and opened fire, killing five and injuring five others before committing suicide as police closed in.

The Amish responded by offering immediate forgiveness to the killer - even attending his funeral - and embracing his family. They formed a protective shield around the mourners so that intrusive press photographers couldn’t take pictures of the grieving family.

Terri Roberts forgave, too, and now she is sharing her experience with others, saying the world needs more stories about the power of forgiveness and the importance of seeking joy through adversity.

'I realized if I didn't forgive him, I would have the same hole in my heart that he had. And a root of bitterness never brings peace to anyone,' Roberts said. 'We are called to forgive.'

‘it doesn't matter how dark the day is, the love of the Lord continues, and he is capable of writing a redemption story over our lives even in those dark places,'[[2]](#endnote-2)

‘Courage is fear that has said its prayers’. May we have the courage of Jeremiah that through prayer we may overcome our fears and live for the Lord. May we pray for God’s provision for those times when we need help, for an Ebed Meleck to throw us a rope and pull us up out of a muddy dark place.

1. <http://frederickbuechner.com/content/jeremiah> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2520819/Family-Amish-schoolhouse-shooter-shares-story-forgiveness.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)