**7th February 2016**

**Jeremiah 18.1-11**

Thank you for all your cards and kind wishes last week. I feel thoroughly fiftiethed! On the day of my 50th birthday I looked on my Facebook page and there was an advert from my football team that said at Burnley’s next home game against Hull City there would be free prostate cancer testing for any men aged 50 and over. There you go - some perks of reaching your half century! I was amazed to discover that the last time Burnley offered free tests over 200 men volunteered. Two of whom were discovered to have a potentially serious condition. That would spoil the game! Who knows what the future holds?

Well God does and the prophets spoke about the future and the present as they brought God’s Word into situations. This month we are looking at the prophet Jeremiah. Prophets in the Old Testament felt compelled to share what they believed was God’s views on the state of their present society as well as predicting what may lay ahead for their nation.

To judge by the length of his book Jeremiah was the most significant prophet of the last years of Judah’s independent life up until the nation was overcome by the Babylonians in 587 BC. From King Solomon’s time there had been two kingdoms Ephraim in the north and Judah in the south with its capital and centre at Jerusalem. Assyria had been the superpower that had conquered Ephraim but now Assyria was on the wane and the Babylonians were becoming the more dominant power in the region.

During his lifetime the great King Josiah sought to bring about a reform of Judah’s religious and community life, more in line with biblical standards as set out in the covenant to Moses. But the reform had no lasting effect. As Babylon rose in power more than one Babylonian invasion of Judah followed. Jeremiah sees these events as not merely the consequence of unwise political policies but as the consequence of unwise religious and social policies. Behind Babylon’s invasion he sees the hand of God.

Jeremiah’s ministry lasted forty years and he spent the bulk of it warning Judah about the chastisement that would come unless it turned back to God. He would criticise his people for not living up to God’s standards. They were worshipping false idols and other gods. They were not keeping the Sabbath. Those in authority were not looking after the vulnerable and oppressed. There was no justice. They were doing wrong and violence to the alien, the fatherless and the widows. (Jer 21.11-12, 22.3).

He was a reluctant prophet because he had to bring bad news to people. He had to say things that people didn’t want to hear. He would be beaten up, thrown in jail, thrown down wells, threatened with his life during his ministry. He prayed to God that he cursed the day he was born because of the prophetic burden that had been placed on him. He had to warn the people of Judah about a catastrophe that didn’t happen, and he lost credibility as years passed until eventually decades later what Jeremiah had been prophesying actually came about. Before then he was opposed by false prophets who told the people what they wanted to hear but not what God said. It is a warning to us that we should always listen for God’s voice even in the stuff that is uncomfortable, the messages we do not want to hear.

I read Rob Parsons writing about difficult people. He said *you will always have to deal with difficult people in your life who always seem to criticise. How do we tell whether somebody who criticises us is really being helpful or not? The answer is to ask ourselves a question: ‘Is the critic in the building business, or the demolition game?’ the skills needed for both are, as you will now, quite different. For the one, you patiently lay a foundation and then carefully lay brick upon brick until something arises from the ground that you can be proud of. For the other, you go to something that another person has built and knock it down with a big steel ball.*

*Our critics are either builders or destroyers. Those who are builders have a single aim: they want to see us grow – to get better at what we do. The things they say to us are with the sole purpose of helping us develop. They are on our side, part of the team – if we are in a race they would be on the side shouting encouragement. At times, what they have to say may hurt (the book of Proverbs says, ‘faithful ae the wounds of a friend’), but they are on our side; they are for us.*

*Those in the second category are different. Their aim is not to build up but to pull down. There may be no end to the opinions they have about us and about what we are doing. They will comment on the way we dress, speak and style our hair. They will conduct appraisals of our work skills, our private life, the kind of car we drive, how our children behave. But whatever they are critiquing, their aim is not to help us but to rob us of joy and peace in what we do. You will never please such people.*

*But even those critics who are destroyers, even though they criticise you for the wrong reasons, there may be a grain of truth in what they say. So in a quiet moment, ponder and decide – for yourself – whether any is of any value. But whether or not you want to make any changes, don’t spend your life looking over your shoulder and wondering what others are making of it. Some years ago a woman wrote saying, ‘I have spent fifty years – half a century – imprisoned in other people’s opinions of my life’.*

*Don’t do time in that prison.*

*There is no freedom like knowing you have nothing to prove.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

As I read Jeremiah he is very critical and negative of his society – yet I believe his criticism came from a desire that the people could be better, society could be more in tune with God’s will. He longed for positive change.

Jeremiah in this passage uses a visual image of a potter and clay to visualise how God deals with his people. He is told to go down to the potter’s house where he will be given a message. Often the world around us if we have the eyes to see speaks to us. We can see things and hear God speaking to us through what we see. Jeremiah sees a Potter working at his wheel. But the pot that he was shaping from clay was marred in his hands so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. From this picture he draws out parallels with how God is relating to his people.

It’s a suggestive image. It means that we are malleable, open to being formed into what God wants u to be, so that we are more likely to live by the saying ‘blessed ae the flexible, for they shall not be broken’. We trust in God to mould us and direct us as he sees fit. The insight meshes with some scathing remarks from the prophet Isiah (chapter 45) about people who resemble clay but who think they can talk back to the potter and asks whether he knows what he is doing.

One might see clay as simply malleable raw material that a potter can shape at will. Yet like wool or stone that a sculptor works; it can seem to have a mind of its own, so the potter may find himself having to be flexible as he does his work. Sometimes the clay won’t turn into the shape he has in mind. He doesn’t then throw it away, but he does roll it up and start again, maybe adding some more water.

Jeremiah goes down to the potter’s house and observes this. The insight that comes to him isn’t so much that Israel must be clay in the potter’s hand. It’s that Israel **is clay** in the potter’s hand, so it had better get used to the idea. Yes, there is indeed an interaction between potter and clay, and the clay can resist the potter’s shaping, but the potter remains in control of what happens to the clay. The potter is **sovereign but flexible**.

It might seem that sovereignty would imply inflexibility. Political diatribe often pictures changing your mind as a weakness; it suggests you didn’t foresee all the factors you should’ve taken in account in making your original decision. Maggie Thatcher was infamously known as the woman who was not for turning. Poor Old David Cameron is trying to get the European Union to be a bit more flexible towards Britain’s participation in it and is getting flak from all sides.

I went on a training day earlier this week looking a personality types and how they work in teams and in leadership. One type of personality likes to have everything ordered and prepared well in advance and feel in control. Some individuals hate having to make advanced plans preferring to be more spontaneous. The two types need each other. The first type needs the second type to help them not to be too hasty, to appreciate that a variety of options exists, to see that a setback need not be a disaster and that rules should be servants not masters and have fun and enjoy the moment. The second type needs the first type to help them come to a decision, to provide some structure and routine and the benefits of an ordered lifestyle and to ensure that necessary jobs get done. We are all different aren’t we? We all need each other.

The Bible is happy with the idea that God interacts with humanity, that there is an interaction between divine sovereignty and human reaction. It implies that when you’re confident about your ultimate sovereignty, you can afford to be flexible and to take the long view. That assumption makes sense of history and of the church’s history, which doesn’t always look as if they’re simply the outworking of an ideal divine plan.

Translations sometimes speak of God repenting which would imply that God has done something wrong; but ‘relenting’ - more ‘having a change of mind’ better conveys the force of Hebrew verb. Sometimes it can mean ‘regretting’ , though in the sense of being sorry that one had to do something, not in the sense of wishing one hadn’t done it.

The response of the clay, then, can lead to the potter’s relenting or having a change of mind about how to shape the clay. This change can be good news. Although Jeremiah keeps warning Judah that judgement is coming, God remains flexible. All Judah has to do is turn back.

In two ways, however Jeremiah’s message makes a much more general point. On the one hand the principle of flexibility applies to promises as well as warnings. When Judahites in a new generation’s time read the prophecies in this book, a point when God is talking about restoring the community or is in the midst of doing so, they need to be aware of that fact. God could have a change of mind about restoring Judah if he doesn’t get the right response. On the other hand, the double principle applies to nations in general, not just too ancient Judah. Jonah applies it to Nineveh and people in Jeremiah’s day and to apply it to Babylon or to their own neighbours whose judgement Jeremiah will soon be declaring. The Old Testament assumes that God is involved in the destiny of all the nations and is interacting with them.

Even when Jeremiah reports the people of Judah as saying that the situation is hopeless and that there’s no way they’re going to turn back to God, he’s seeking to break through to get them to change their minds. So there is a prayer at the end of this chapter which Jeremiah reports so that the people can know how he’s praying; and they know about the power of his words from God, so they know about the power of his words to God. Paul often wrote down his prayers for his churches to act as a galvanizing effect on them, arousing hope and openness. Knowing how Jeremiah was praying against you might have a parallel galvanising effect, arousing fear and opens and desire to change. [[2]](#endnote-2)

Are we flexible enough to change? Blessed are the flexible for they shall not be broken? When we are confident about our ultimate sovereignty, that we safe in God’s hands, can we turn with courage and confidence to our futures, whatever they may hold; knowing that we interact with the divine potter to be moulded and shaped into something beautiful.

1. Rob Parson, The Wisdom House, Hodder 2014 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. John Goldingay , Jeremiah for Everyone, SPCK 2015 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)