

16th June 2024

Trinity 3, Matins

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Jeremiah was called to be God's prophet at a particular difficult time for his people. In Jeremiah 1:3 it is said that Jeremiah heard the divine word during the reign of King Josiah, Johiakim, and Zedekiah. These were incredibly difficult years where Israel was under attack by the Bablylonians and those in Jerusalem taken into exile. In this trying time - God called Jeremiah. The people had doubted if God was still with them. If this is happening, it hardship befalls us - has God grown weary of us, has he forsaken his covenant?

But God sends Jeremiah to his people to reassure and remind that God is still intimately with his people despite what happens around them. Jeremiah has a special vocation in which he was called before he was born, God ensures the prophet of God's enduring presence — a promise that is beautifully illustrated by the reference to God touching Jeremiah's mouth giving him the words to speak.

Although for such as intimate expression - the words that the prophet speaks are not always easy. In fact they are so intimate that they speak of those things in which God is not happy about. This is an intimate relationship that is loving but at times, like the words of other prophets and indeed from the likes of John the Baptist and Jesus, they can be what is described as a 'tough love'. Chapter 7 which we have heard could be described as tough love. It is called the Temple Sermon. Which challenges the idea that because the people go to the temple, then they are ok, they don't need to worry about the other aspects of their behaviour.

God is not only concerned with their worship in the temple but wants his people to worship God in everything they do, which is made clear in verse 5-6 - it also means justice. Change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, 6 if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm. If God truly was in your midst in this worshiping community, you would be dealing justly with all people; you would not take advantage of those who are powerless; you would not commit violence against other. It can be tricky reading these prophets words in such a different context, and think about how we should apply them into a diverse and increasingly secular context in which the church cohabits

It causes us to think. What is tough love today? Do you really want to hear tough love on a Sunday morning from a pulpit containing an ulster man. How do we talk... sin... which is really what's going on here. Theologian Douglas John Hall VOCABULARY OF CHRISTIAN FAITH SUFFERS from misunderstanding at every turn, but no one term is as badly understood in both society and church as the little word, 'sin'. Critics can say the church can be too severe, too absolute - making it too BIG. When our theologian Douglas John Hall thinks we make too small. It can often mistakenly be reduced to negative personal failings. Lets domesticate this concept by making it about personal morality

This religious idea actually lingers and prospers because as much critics don't like us talking about sin, it often fits with wider secular and economic privatisation of culture. If that sounds like I'm bashing conservatives, maybe I am, but not exclusively because while conservative can make sin into a personal tale, liberal on the other hand tend to feel too embarrassed to even talk about sin - believing and also assimilating to the idea of optimistic Progress - things can only get better??

Whereas the Bible, as we read about with Jeremiah the prophet - he is not making sin small. He is making it big. He's not saying a few of you have some personal failings. He's not saying things will progressively get better, evidently this is not true if you read the roller coaster narrative of scripture. He is making sin - big. On one hand the prophets stood in profound solidarity with their people's pain and anxiety. On the other, they did not shrink from questioning or even condemning the national project.

The true prophet, in other words, loves the people enough to tell them the hard truth. A call to repent is a call to change. As we enter an election season. Those in pulpits shouldn't advocate party politics. But ought to challenge us to think about our national project without trying to impose what Jeremiah was dealing with onto our own. But perhaps taking the insight that we should not think of sin as merely personal or something that we either ignore or think that in time it will work itself out. All parties advocate and promise change. And all agree that change must happen as we continue to walk into what is perhaps our most pressing 21st century crisis. Despite our growing sense as a society that our relentless exploitation of the earth is utterly unsustainable, We hear that environmental policy exploits the poor and should be made wary of this. And we also hear that we cannot afford a green recovery.

This is something that concerns us all - it is not some personal failing it is not something in which the market doesn't seem to be correcting. What is wrong, says Wendell Berry plainly, is that "*we all live by robbing nature, but our standard of living demands that the robbery shall continue.*" As we think about our national project as Jeremiah was called to challenge. Where do we need to change?

What tough love do we need to accept. Where are we captive to our illusions, excesses, and appetites. How can we imagine the world differently. And where our small ideas of sin can't help us. Amen