

**Sunday 7 July 2024, 6th Sunday of Trinity,
Jeremiah 20. 1-11 (with reference to Psalm 31)
The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

Behold terror is on every side.

What we read today from the prophecy of Jeremiah may be interpreted as an allegory. There is a conflict between the Jeremiah and one named Pashhur, who is a priest of the Levitical class tasked with keeping order in the Temple. Jeremiah has been given a word from the Lord, namely that soon the armies of Babylon will come and take away into exile the people of God because they have abandoned him and worshipped idols. Pashhur does not approve of this message. It is disorderly. It contradicts the message his priestly caste wishes to convey to the people, namely that there is peace in the land and there will be continued peace, and prosperity. No one likes to be told that disaster is coming. No one likes to hear that an enemy army is on its way. No one likes to hear that the established order is going to be destroyed. Jeremiah has been given an unenviable task, and for his obedience he is publicly humiliated and locked away.

As I said, this story may be understood as an allegory. Jeremiah represents the word of God. Pashhur represents those who do not wish to hear it. In its simplest form, what we are taught in this passage is that those who do not wish to hear the word of God will do everything they can to stop it, even locking it away. Yet what we see is that the word of God cannot be bound. Though the one who delivers it may be in the stocks, the word is still spoken and will still be fulfilled. For what do we know of Pashhur after apparent triumph over Jeremiah? We know only this: that of the families listed as returning from Babylonian exile in the book of Ezra there are over 1000 who traced their lineages to the priest called Pashhur. The word of power cannot be denied. It will be fulfilled, no matter what we do.

This simple allegory may be expanded upon when we read the name which Jeremiah- in prophetic utterance- gave to Pashhur. This name is in the Hebrew 'magor missabib'. It means 'terror on every side'. It is, incidentally, a phrase that we encounter in Psalm 31 where we hear these words: *I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery for I hear many whispering, terror on every side. They conspire against me and plot to take my life.* In naming Pashhur 'magor missabib', Jeremiah proclaims that the rest of Pashhur's life will be only terror. He will be taken into captivity, along with his family, and all his friends. The word of power, the word of the Lord, has proclaimed it. In this understanding of the allegory, 'terror on every side' becomes the name of all those who refuse to hear the word of the Lord or who try to prevent it from going forth.

Perhaps even in your own life you may have experienced some of this terror. It is the terror that comes upon us deep in our conscience when we know that we are choosing to do what is wrong, choosing not to hear the word of the Lord, choosing to try in our own power to lock away that word so that it may not speak and disrupt our lives. Like Pashhur, every time we do not listen to the word of God we find ourselves more and more in exile. This is not an exile of the body to another place, this is not an exile affected by an invading army. This is a self-imposed exile, a

separation from the presence of God, a desert waste which is not our home but in which we must live because we have denied the word of power. The longer we live in this exile, the more we try to block out the word of God, the more entrapped we become. We become to ourselves 'terror on every side'.

But there is hope, should we choose to grasp it, by placing ourselves in the position of the prophet Jeremiah. For in this allegory, this is possible to play more than one role. If we find that the word of God is a terror for us, it is best, in an effort to mend our ways, to speak as Jeremiah does: for he says, *O Lord you have enticed me and I was enticed; you have overpowered me and you have prevailed. For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.* When we admit to ourselves that this word troubles us deeply, we are in a position to say also, *but the Lord is with me therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail.* We say with the words, again of the 31st Psalm, *but I trust in you, Lord; you say you are my God. My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of my enemies, and from those who persecute me. Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love. Let me not be put to shame Lord for I have cried out to you.*

We have a choice when confronted by the word of God. We can be as Pashhur, or we can be as Jeremiah. For both recognise that the word of the Lord is a challenge to disobedience, to unwillingness to hear and to change. But whereas the former attempts to deny the word becoming to himself 'magor missabib', 'terror on every side', the latter becomes the penitent Jeremiah, a name which means 'Yahweh loosens', or 'the Lord will set free'. Indeed, if we place ourselves in the position of Jeremiah, the word of the Lord is ultimately not a terror but a word of freedom. This word frees us from our self-imposed exile, it frees us from a Babylonian captivity, a slavery to our worst selves - for we are our own worst taskmasters - and puts us in a different place so that we can say, yes again with the Psalmist, *how abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you, and that you bestow in the sight of all, on those who take refuge in you. Praise be to the Lord, for he showed me the wonders of his love when I was as a city under siege.*

So my friends, what is the word of God to you this day? Is it a word of terror or a word of freedom? Are you Pashhur, or are you Jeremiah? Amen.