

CUTTING EDGE CAMELOT, No 34

Wednesday 1st July 2020

‘Virtually Church but with some way to go...’

Welcome

Welcome to this midweek edition of Cutting Edge Camelot. We continue our series on Biblical characters who have been imprisoned by looking at Jeremiah.

Perhaps the best way of understanding Jeremiah is to read through the book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament. However, I have prepared a short introduction to Jeremiah as a prophet and also to the circumstances of his imprisonment. There then follows an excerpt from the book of Jeremiah with a reflection on this.

Jeremiah the prophet

The book of Jeremiah may not be the best-known book in the Bible. And what immediately springs to our mind when we think of Jeremiah? Proverbially we use his name to describe someone who spreads around nothing but doom and gloom.

But although the Biblical prophet Jeremiah did indeed have a message of judgement for his own and other nations there is much more to him than this.

First of all, far from delighting in this tough message, Jeremiah was a very sensitive person who shrank from the calling of proclaiming God’s message truthfully and without reservation.

He cared about the suffering of his nation. So, he tells us ‘For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt...O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!’ (Jeremiah 8:21-9.1).

And although Jeremiah does indeed prophesy destruction and doom he can also see hope and a new purpose which lies beyond, ‘For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.’ (Jeremiah 29:11)

And this hope culminates in a prophetic insight into a new covenant, ‘But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’ (Jeremiah 31:33). As Christians we find this new covenant fulfilled in Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Jeremiah’s imprisonment

Jeremiah prophesied at a time when Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, was attacked by the Babylonians. They had already carried off the king and much of the nobility into exile and installed a new king Zedekiah. However, Zedekiah, with political calculation, had revolted against Babylonian rule in the hope that Egypt would come to his and the nation’s aid.

Jeremiah’s response to this might surprise us. His message was do not try to fight Babylon but instead surrender. Perhaps not surprisingly Jeremiah’s opponents accused him of being a traitor. But Jeremiah was not acting as a secret Babylonian agent. He knew that Babylon, too, would ultimately suffer its own destruction (see, for instance, Jeremiah 25:12).

As a prophet Jeremiah could see God’s larger picture which was more important than immediate national interests. Many times he and other

prophets had invited Judah and its northern neighbour Israel to repent, to turn away from oppression and violence and to embrace justice and righteousness. But their message had fallen on deaf ears.

So in the end the destruction of Jerusalem had become inevitable and here the Babylonians were acting as instruments of God's judgement (see, for instance, Jeremiah 27:5-7). So, Jeremiah wrote to those already in exile in Babylon that rather than praying for and expecting a speedy return they should build houses, plant gardens, marry and 'seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile' (see Jeremiah 29:4-7).

But not surprisingly this was not understood by Zedekiah the king of Judah or most of his officials. Their opposition had resulted in Jeremiah being put in prison either in the court of the guard next to the king's palace or, worse, in a cistern where a prolonged stay would end in certain death.

This is the background to the encounter between Jeremiah and his king Zedekiah which is described in our Bible reading below.

Zedekiah emerges as a man of divided loyalties. On the one hand, he wants to hear what Jeremiah has to say, for it is he who has asked for this meeting. And Zedekiah has helped Jeremiah to the extent of transferring him from the extreme conditions of the cistern to the relative security of the court of the guard (see Jeremiah 37:20-21). In his own way he understands that Jeremiah is indeed a prophet sent by God who should be respected.

On the other hand, however, he is unable to fully trust Jeremiah or the message from God which Jeremiah brings him. He is told that if he surrenders to the Babylonians then his life will be spared and the city of Jerusalem will not be destroyed. Tragically, however, he does not listen and so Jerusalem is indeed destroyed, Zedekiah's sons are killed and Zedekiah himself is horribly punished and taken off to Babylon (see Jeremiah 39:1-9).

Zedekiah's divided loyalties mean that his decisions are swayed by powerful political groups around him whom he seeks to appease. He reverses his previous decision to move Jeremiah from the cistern into the court of the guard at the bidding of his officials. And then he does a double U turn when petitioned by another counsellor called Ebed-Melech and so Jeremiah is sent back again to the court of the guard (see Jeremiah 38:4-13).

Scripture Passage

Jeremiah 38:14-28

King Zedekiah sent for the prophet Jeremiah and received him at the third entrance of the temple of the LORD. The king said to Jeremiah, "I have something to ask you; do not hide anything from me."

Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "If I tell you, you will put me to death, will you not? And if I give you advice, you will not listen to me."

So King Zedekiah swore an oath in secret to Jeremiah, "As the LORD lives, who gave us our lives, I will not put you to death or hand you over to these men who seek your life."

Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "Thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, If you will only surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be handed over to the Chaldeans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand."

King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, "I am afraid of the Judeans who have deserted to the Chaldeans, for I might be handed over to them and they would abuse me."

Jeremiah said, “That will not happen. Just obey the voice of the LORD in what I say to you, and it shall go well with you, and your life shall be spared. But if you are determined not to surrender, this is what the LORD has shown me - a vision of all the women remaining in the house of the king of Judah being led out to the officials of the king of Babylon and saying, ‘Your trusted friends have seduced you and have overcome you; Now that your feet are stuck in the mud, they desert you.’ All your wives and your children shall be led out to the Chaldeans, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand, but shall be seized by the king of Babylon; and this city shall be burned with fire.”

Then Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “Do not let anyone else know of this conversation, or you will die. If the officials should hear that I have spoken with you, and they should come and say to you, ‘Just tell us what you said to the king; do not conceal it from us, or we will put you to death. What did the king say to you?’ then you shall say to them, ‘I was presenting my plea to the king not to send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there.’”

All the officials did come to Jeremiah and questioned him; and he answered them in the very words the king had commanded. So they stopped questioning him, for the conversation had not been overheard.

And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard until the day that Jerusalem was taken.

Reflection

As we reflect on this encounter between the prophet Jeremiah and the king Zedekiah perhaps what strikes us first is the integrity which Jeremiah displays under pressure. How easy and tempting it must have been for Jeremiah to disown the advice which had led to his imprisonment in the first place and to give the king some easy and popular assurance of a swift victory over the Babylonians aided by an alliance with Egypt. But Jeremiah

refuses to do this and indeed he merely reiterates starkly and unequivocally his original message of the need to surrender to Babylon.

And yet although Jeremiah does indeed maintain his integrity he is by no means immune to the very real pressures of his position. He fears for his life and so he first seeks from Zedekiah an assurance that the king will not put him to death if he gives him unpopular advice. Courage has sometimes been defined as being 'not the absence of fear, but the capacity to act despite our fears.' And this fits what we learn of Jeremiah in this passage.

The king Zedekiah is also afraid. He fears what those of his own people who have already gone over to the Babylonians might do to him. But he, unlike Jeremiah and despite all the assurances that he is given, is unable to follow Jeremiah's advice or even acknowledge that he has met him.

And so we ask who is really in a position of power? Zedekiah has the position and the outward trappings of power but in reality he seems very impotent. He goes backwards and forwards in the way that he treats Jeremiah according to which group of advisers he is listening to at the time. Maybe this reminds of our own politics where decisions can be swayed by the latest focus group or opinion poll rather than being based on firmly grounded principles.

But although Jeremiah is outwardly powerless he is able simply to stand firm on what he believes God has said to him. And this gives him a strength and certainty of purpose even when what he has to say makes him unpopular.

And again we may ask who really is imprisoned and who really is free? Outwardly, Zedekiah is free and yet inwardly he is imprisoned and paralysed by fear. On the other hand Jeremiah who is physically imprisoned is inwardly free to trust God and proclaim God's word. Jesus

describes this kind of inner freedom when He says, ‘if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed’ (John 8:36).

Tristram

Points for Prayers

- For our spiritual growth and discipleship as we respond to the good news of Jesus Christ, for grace to be inspired by the way in which Jeremiah displayed integrity when under pressure
- For Camelot churches in responding to the reopening for private prayer and public worship
- Thanksgiving for care, skill and courage of NHS workers and those in care homes
- Those suffering from coronavirus in hospitals, care homes and at home
- Need for further largescale testing
- Prayers for parents, teachers, governors and children of North Cadbury Church of England Primary School as the school is partially reopened, prayers also for Horsington school
- Funerals needing to take place under new restrictions with only family mourners
- Prayers for those affected economically by the lockdown, for businesses and those who have become unemployed
- Prayers and thanksgiving for contributions to the foodbanks and for those helping to take these to the foodbanks.

Update on reopening churches for private prayer and public worship

Permission was given for the reopening of churches for private prayer. This permission was coupled with the need to complete a Risk Assessment and to

meet some fairly rigorous standards for instance in relation to cleaning, hygiene and social distancing. Not all of the Camelot churches have the resources at present to comply with these standards, especially the need for regular and thorough cleaning.

However, a number of churches across the Group are now open for private prayer as follows:-

Sunday morning

Compton Pauncefoot open from 9.30am to 10.30am.

South Cadbury open from 10.00am to 12 noon

North Cadbury open from 10.30am to 12 noon

Monday afternoon

Galhampton open from 4.00pm to 5.00pm

Wednesday afternoon

North Cadbury, open from 2.30pm to 4.00pm

Friday afternoon

Galhampton open from 10.00am to 11.00am

There has also been a further government announcement that as from Sunday 5th July it will be possible also for public worship to take place. This, however, is again conditional on detailed guidance to be issued by the government and the church. It is anticipated that this guidance will be available shortly following which it will be possible to make detailed plans in this respect.

Growing as a worshipper, a servant and a family

*We pray that 'we might live in love,
as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us'*

(Ephesians 5:2)