

## LOOKING TO THE LONG TERM

Hebrews 13:7-16

Once upon a time, a long time ago - how many of our fables and moral stories start this way. The histories of the Old Testament can have that same remote feel. But actually the story I am going to tell you didn't just happen once upon a time, it happened at a very definite time and in a very definite place - around 700 year before Christ and in Judah. Judah, the tiniest of the vassal states of the super-power, Assyria. Judah who stood between Assyria and the Egyptian Empire. Judah, which had seen here sister-state Israel conquered and her people taken into exile by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.

Back then, if anyone had told the Assyrian leaders that the main reason that their empire and conquests would be remembered across the world, two and a half thousand years hence was because of what happened in Judah, they would have been utterly bemused and astonished. Theirs was a vast and powerful empire, the fact that Judah sat on the doorstep was simply and annoyance they hadn't yet dealt with. Judah wasn't yet part of the empire, but she was a vassal state - she knew that her alliances had to be to Assyria, and that to keep the super-power's protection, there were payments to be made.

The payments which Assyria extracted from her vassals were not just in gold and silver - though that was a part of it. They also insisted that the leaders and the people swear allegiance to their gods and worship in the cult and tradition of Asshur. Political leaders have often tried to get religion to be on their side, subtly, or not so subtly twisting and changing what may be done, what should be believed. Think of how Nazism persuaded the bulk of the German church to merge their youth movement with that of the Hitler youth, to declare that Hitler embodied God's law, that Germany was the Holy Land, and to get rid of very large chunks of the Scriptures. Or remember how Mrs. Thatcher, when presented with the Church of England's critical report "Faith in the City" told the Church (actually the Church of Scotland, but she meant it in general) to keep to people's personal piety, and out of national politics. Using or usurping religion has always been a ploy of certain rulers.

However, at the turn of the seventh century B.C., the Judean King Hezekiah rebelled against this demand for apostasy. It was one step too far to turn from their God, who had led them from Egypt and through the long years in the promised land. He tidied up the religious worship in Judah and banished foreign ways. Retribution was swift. In 701 Sennacherib came down "like and wolf on the fold" as the poet says, and laid waste to Judah. Contemporary accounts describe the land as being made into a desert. But Jerusalem did not fall. God honoured Hezekiah, and Isaiah, his prophetic adviser, and the Assyrians, even as they were besieging Jerusalem, had to turn tail and run off to fight another rebellion elsewhere. Even so, the suffering of the people was extreme.

No wonder that Hezekiah's son Manasseh was more pragmatic when he came to the throne. He was not going to inflict the kind of suffering on his people as had come from Hezekiah's faithfulness. He fully embraced the Assyrian cult of Asshur and taught the people to do the same. Shrines were built, statues of the god erected, ritual prostitution was winked at and child-sacrifice permitted; moreover the right of the powerful over the weak of society became absolute. Manasseh was trying to save his people from suffering at the hands of foreigners. What happened was that they inflicted injustice on each other.

What the people had to learn was that it is better to embrace God's ways of

righteousness, no matter what the threat, and to trust him. One of Jeremiah's points was to be that there is a fate worse than exile, which is to fall out of God's hands. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that in this world we do not have a continuing city - in other words there will always be changes in our outward circumstances. But we look to God's eternal city, through faith in Jesus who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Manasseh and his ilk had not learned to look to God for more than the short term. Sometimes not even for that.

Meanwhile, in the far north, in what we call Iraq, a man called Nabopolassar had led Babylon to break away from Assyria. He had a son, named Nebuchadnezzar, who was to put Babylon firmly on the map. This is where Jeremiah comes in.

Read Jeremiah 1:1-19

Jeremiah was one of a priestly family, one of the priests that were at the town of Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. To us this may seem a fairly innocuous statement, but to his contemporaries, and near-contemporaries this was a statement loaded with implications and questions. The first question was: why were there priests in Anathoth at all? The priests were supposed to serve in the temple at Jerusalem, the central shrine. They took it in turns to minister there, but they weren't supposed to be ministering elsewhere. The implication from this is that the shrine at Anathoth, which must have had something to do with proper Israelite worship, probably also had something to do with the cult of Asshur. The priests who were Jeremiah's family were very likely implicated in the syncretism which, as we saw last week, was one of the signs of the time.

Jeremiah first hears God's call during the reign of Josiah, and Josiah was a reforming King who tried to get the faith of the nation back on track. In the future we shall see that Jeremiah never really took to Josiah's emphasis on the Jerusalem temple as the centre of all righteousness. What went on at Anathoth might have been a bit suspect, but from it Jeremiah had learned that people need to have access to God every day, not just on special occasions when they were able to get to the proper place.

Moreover, despite being brought up in the compromised place by this compromising family, Jeremiah does hear God's voice. He hears it clearly, and he knows who is speaking. It is reassuring to know that even when we get things very mixed and muddled at times, and when we let our human self-interest or worldly wisdom stand in the way of our faith, still God is able to make himself heard when it really matters. It really mattered now.

Jeremiah hears God call him. He doesn't tell us how. When Isaiah, a century or so before, had been called by God, he recounted the time and the place and the vision he had received. Jeremiah doesn't say if he saw a vision, or heard a voice, or was convinced by Josiah's reform and his reading of Scripture, or simply heard God speak in the events around him. What matters is not how, but that God spoke. Many of us should remember that as we tie ourselves in knots straining for spiritual experience.

Jeremiah hears God call him, but he isn't really happy about it. "I'm just a boy" is his plea. Shades of Moses who said that he was afraid, said that he couldn't speak well, and then asked God just to send someone else. Shades of Jonah who heard God speak and promptly set off in the opposite direction. Shades of many of us who know perfectly well what God would have us do, but argue against it to ourselves, finding all sorts of excuses why it should not be so. I'm so glad to know

that I am not alone when I do this - but I am reminded that though Jeremiah and Moses and Jonah might have felt the same, in the end they did do what they were told - and they did it because God promised to be with them.

I love the way God reassures Jeremiah - here is one of the first sermons to use word-play to get the message home. It doesn't come out in English, but when Jeremiah says that he sees a branch of almond, and God says I am watching over my word to perform it, the words branch and watching are just one letter different in Hebrew. God uses the word-play to make the message memorable. Jeremiah is going to need to remember the message. Every time he sees a branch now he will remember that God is watching over him and over his word. Jeremiah accepts God's promise and reassurance. He grows in courage, and courage is also what he is going to need.

We live in a time like Jeremiah's, when it takes courage to stand up and declare the way of God to a society which is not listening and doesn't want to hear. The book of Jeremiah has passages in it where the prophet addresses the nations and his own nation with the voice of God. It has passages which tell what happened to Jeremiah as a result, and it has some very honest passages, where Jeremiah tells God just how he is feeling: like many of us, he only records the times when he feels the need to complain. He might complain, but he gets on with the job that God has given him. He is still faithful.

In a time of threat and exile we are called to be brave and faithful. That doesn't necessarily mean that if we are, everything will come all right again. (Anyway, was everything ever really "all right" in the past?) We are called to be brave and faithful in our words and our ways. We are called, as Jeremiah was, to live the message, to live in a way that matches our words. This can be in simple things: do we use far-trade tea and coffee in church and at home? It can be in what we see as bigger things: how and why do we invest our money? Do our personal savings or our church's investment go to help fund wars and weapons, injustice and imbalance that we say we stand against.

Jeremiah's hearers had to accept his call to reform, to courageous faith with no promise. In fact they knew that if they heeded Jeremiah, the Assyrians would see that it was the worse for them. We live in the light of the resurrection. We have seen what their understanding could only vaguely strain towards. If they had to believe that there was a fate worse than exile, then we know that there is no need to fear what this world can say or do. Here we have no lasting city, but we look to the long term, to the city that is to come.

Thanks be to God that his word stands firm. God grant that we may be found worthy to be citizens of his city that is to come. Amen.