

## **Jeremiah**

God came to me, when I was quite young, and he called me to be his prophet. I wasn't really keen for the rôle, I'm just a normal, matter-of-fact, tell-it-like-it-is sort of person; but God assured me that he would be with me, so that there was no need to fear. I must say, there were times in my life when I had to hold on to that promise for all I was worth, times when it seemed that there was very good reason indeed to fear - to fear for my life. But when God calls you, there's not really a choice, not if you want to have any peace of mind. I knew that if I turned away from God's call I would have to turn away from God himself, and then where would I be?

So God called me, and I became his young and fearful prophet.

When God calls someone to be a prophet it seems he rarely has good news to give his people. Prophets are the mouthpieces of God to tell people where they've gone wrong. Well, perhaps that's a generalisation, after all, a hundred years before me Isaiah had had some very good things to say - but he had the bad news to give as well. Anyway, God wanted me to tell the people, to speak to the nation and tell them that they had been living in ways which were far from what God wanted or expected of them. I had to tell them to turn from worshipping statues and false gods, and return to the true and only God. I knew that most of them wouldn't want to hear this: if they had, they'd have been doing the right thing already. But I did what I was asked. I stood up, in the market place, in the temple, wherever I could get a crowd, and I told them. I told them with picture language, likening Judah to a false bride. I told them in plain Hebrew, not mincing my words but spelling out for them how they had turned away to other gods, how fickle they had been in their affections.

I spoke about the way they treated the temple like some sort of divine insurance policy, and how even the strong nations around us would not be able to spare us from God's wrath, sent to bring us to our senses. Sometimes I acted out parables, like the time when I put on a loin-cloth then went and buried it by the Euphrates river. A few days later I retrieved it, but of course it was ruined. And I used that ruined cloth to show people that just as it was good for nothing, so they too were good for nothing if they stubbornly followed their own will and went after other gods.

There were some good things I had to say. God did promise to restore his people, to bring them back from exile. But no one seemed to hear these things. They only heard the promise of exile, not the promise that it would not last forever.

I spoke, and I wrote as well. I employed a scribe, named Baruch, and he wrote down what God told me to say, so that it wouldn't be forgotten. He wrote down some other things too. He wrote down some of the things I said to God when life was getting very tough indeed for me, or when I could see that nothing I was doing was making a blind bit of difference to the people of Judah. I even accused God at times, saying things like; "Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Truly you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail." (Jeremiah 15:18) But every time I complained and accused God, he spoke to me with love and reassurance, and he gave me the will to go on in my thankless task.

When I began to speak, Josiah was on the throne. I wasn't entirely sure about his religious reformation. It seemed to me that you can't really make people worship God, not really worship. You can make them go through the motions, of course. But there were those who did turn to God through Josiah's works, at least for a time. And I was able to go about my work unhindered. It was quite different in King Jehoiakim's days. He was Josiah's son, but they had little in common.

In the fourth year of Jehoiakim Baruch read out in the temple the scroll of all my words which he had been recording. It almost had an effect. People proclaimed a fast and really listened. But then the King sent for the scroll and had it read to him, and as each bit was read he chopped it off with a penknife and threw it in the brazier to be burned. He didn't want the people to turn to God. He knew that then they wouldn't worship in the wicked way which pleased our enemies. He burned the scroll, but not the word of God. Baruch and I sat down and wrote it all over again, with some additional pages.

The Babylonians came against the city, and then the Egyptians drove them off. After that I went to reclaim some family property in the territory of Benjamin. But as I left the city I was arrested and accused of deserting to the Babylonians. No one would listen to my protests, and I ended up in a cistern which was being used as a dungeon.

After many days the King sent for me and asked if there was a word from God. Maybe he thought I would tell him what he wanted to hear, but I couldn't. "You will be handed over to the Babylonians" I answered. Then I pointed out that the false prophets who had said the Babylonians would never come had not been punished for being wrong, so why should I be punished. I was kept in prison, but treated so harshly after that.

And in the end the Babylonians did come, and I was one of those who was left behind. I was no longer a young and fearful prophet. I was old, and I feared no one. The people who were left were afraid though, and they wanted to go and seek help and sanctuary in Egypt. I counselled them not to go, but still they wouldn't listen, and when they went, they took me along as well. And so I ended my days in Egypt.

No one listened to me. No one turned to seek after God, not then. But I knew that my words would remain true for generations to come. I knew that God's promises are always true, and that one day the Righteous Branch he had told me of, would arise, and then the hearts of stone, which my people had shown me would indeed be changed to hearts of living flesh, as God's Spirit brought life to God's people again.

### **Ezekiel**

Flaming wheels! Creatures made up entirely of wings and eyes! Four-faced beings! Glowing coals of fire! A shining crystal dome! A sapphire throne! The glory of the Lord and a voice which caused me to fall flat on my face. That is how God first came to me, as I sat in the place of my exile beside the river Chebar.

I wasn't a young man. I had grown up in Judah, a priest, so I had seen Josiah's reform first hand, and heard Jeremiah's preaching, but somehow they didn't speak to me. They were too plain, too ordinary. I need drama in my life. Drama. Going into exile was drama of a kind. Not a nice kind, but it was change, it meant learning to cope. No one likes to be taken away from their home, but I was able to put a brave face on it, because it was interesting. And then I ended up living beside the river Chebar, and gradually life settled down again. We had been five years in exile when God came to me.

I wasn't the only one who was feeling that exile had lasted long enough. All my fellow Jews were asking questions: how long would it last, when would we get to go home, how were we going to bear it?

Then flaming wheels, many-faced creatures, wings and eyes and that voice from the throne. And God came to me. Life grew interesting again.

It wasn't just what God told me to tell the people, but the way he let me do it

that made life interesting. Some might say I was crazy, but I enjoyed it: I enjoyed literally eating God's word on a visionary scroll. I enjoyed taking a brick, and modelling a siege on it, as though it was a city. I even enjoyed lying on my left side for three hundred and ninety days, to show the length of the years of punishment for Israel, and then lying for forty days on my right side to show the number of years of the punishment of Judah. It was graphic, dramatic. I threw myself into the part.

I enjoyed shaving off my hair and beard and dividing the hair for burning, for striking with sword and for scattering in the wind, to show the fate of the people: and I was glad that I was to hide a few hairs in the skirts of my robe to show that a remnant would return. Visual lessons. These are the ones which go home.

There was a lot that was bad news that I had to tell, but there was always hope: God promised that he would no longer punish father for child or child for father, but each would bear only their own sins. God promised a new heart and a new spirit. God promised that he would take away the false leaders of his people and be their shepherd himself. God promised that although the nation now seemed like a scattering of dry bones in the wilderness, yet he would bring life again to us. All these promises. We have seen the promises of punishment come true, so we have every reason to believe that God will not abandon us and will restore us again.

God may speak to others in less dramatic ways. God may speak to others in more consistent ways - beginning early in life and continuing on. But he came to me in my middle years, when life seemed flat, and life was never uneventful after that. So I have learned that when we ask questions of God we should be prepared to find that he answers. I have discovered that listening for God is the most satisfying way to live. I have discovered that God who cannot let wrong-doing go unnoticed, will also bring his restorative love to us - in his time, when we are ready.