

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

JEREMIAH AND THE HOUSE OF GOD

13th November 2016

Jeremiah 7:1-11

Luke 19:41-48

When you were coming into the church building this morning, I wonder how you would have felt if instead of being greeted with a smile, a handshake, the offer of a book and a word of greeting, instead there was someone standing by the door saying, quite loudly, "This is what God says: 'Amend your ways and your doings and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words, This is the house of God, the house of God the house of God?' " I wonder if you would have come in? Maybe you would, because none of us like to show that we are offended or alarmed. But I expect that quite a few of you would have wanted to have a word with me about it, and I expect a few more would have just quietly decided not to come back, if that was going to be allowed to happen!

What Jeremiah did was not quite that, because the door he appeared at was not that of a country church, but of the great temple in Jerusalem, the one place where people felt safe, because they believed that God lived there in a special way, where the Jewish Ark of the Covenant was kept. The people would go to the temple every day and any day, and it was more than a little disconcerting for them to find Jeremiah standing there telling them to change their ways and turn to God and not to think that by visiting a holy place they would be kept safe - in this world or in eternity.

Jeremiah was quite explicit about what he wanted the people to do, if they were truly to bear the name of God's people. They were to deal justly with one another, to refrain from oppressing those who could not help themselves – the foreigner, the orphan and the widow; and they were not to follow other gods, whatever form they might take.

This is the burden of Jeremiah's message over and over again, as he tried different ways to get it across. As we have been reading the first half of the writing that bears his name, we have seen that sometimes he acts things out, as when he breaks a pot before the leaders of the nation, or when he displays a rotten linen belt to show the rotten-ness at the heart of the nation. Other times he writes it down. Sometimes he proclaims in the presence of the King and his officials, but this time he has gone to the symbolic heart of the nation, the source of their greatest pride, and he is talking to all the people high and lowly as they pass by to perform their acts of worship. Jeremiah knows that anyone who speaks in God's name must try whatever they can to get people to hear the message, because people prefer not to listen.

When Jesus visits the temple, that same temple, though in a later form following devastation and renovation, he is a bit more drastic than Jeremiah. He did not just

speak to the people, but he acted, overturning furniture, physically throwing out all the accretions to worship which had crept in and become more important than God himself. And as he did so, it was Jeremiah that he was quoting, when he named their beautiful temple as a den of robbers. People who speak in God's name have to do whatever needs done to get their message across, and Jesus had got to the stage where his grief for the state of his people meant that there was no use worrying about how things he did and said might react upon his own head.

What drove both Jeremiah and Jesus distracted was that people thought that what mattered was that they did the right thing in the right place at the right time. They came to the temple to make the sacrifices demanded by law for the time of year or the special times in their lives. They had agricultural matters to mark, in petition or thanksgiving; they had new lives in the family to offer to God with a symbolic sacrifice. They had fasts to observe and feasts to celebrate, and they were doing these things without it affecting how they lived with each other or in the wider world.

Jeremiah told them what they should not do, so it is pretty clear that quite a few of them were in fact doing these things – oppressing the foreigners, not looking after the vulnerable, not living with justice and fairness applied to all. Jesus wept over the city because they did not know the things which made for peace, because he could see that the enormous national pride which fuelled both political and religious life would soon reach a boiling point when the ruling Roman powers could not ignore it. The worship was about being a nation, being special, and not about learning to live and love in God's way.

And so, Jeremiah warned the people, and Jesus overturned tables and drove out those who were – legitimately, they thought – selling things in the temple. The rituals of worship meant nothing to him if they were not accompanied by repentance, a turning to God and a living his way. The holy ground which the temple represented was profaned by worship which went through the motions but did not affect the heart.

On this remembrance Sunday, we have stood/will stand at memorials which for some of us rank as holy ground. They are monuments on which are recorded the names of those who lived here before us and lost their lives during the two world wars of last century. We call it an act of remembrance, and so it is, but over the years since such acts were started, the remembering has changed. Now that there are very few of us, if any, who can put a face to any of these names, it is not they themselves as persons that we are remembering. Some of us can think of and remember others, not recorded on our memorials here, who we have known and who have lost their lives in warfare. Some of us remember the ups and downs of a war-time childhood, and remembering it with adult understanding feel more now than we did then, what our families went through. And some of us, the growing majority, remember what we have been told.

But if this is all that we do, then we are no better than the people against whom Jeremiah spoke, or those whom Jesus drove out. If we stand on holy ground and feel only pride as we offer prayer and remembrance to God – pride in our heritage – then we do not remember well. If we stand on holy ground and become bitter in spirit as we think of how things have changed in the nation or in our families, then we do not remember well.

We have a heritage of which we can be proud, but we cannot take any credit for it ourselves. Moreover, distance from events shows them in fuller aspect than we can see when we are caught up in them. Changes happen in life all the time and some are

for better and some are for worse, but bitterness is no way to carry hope forward. If we remember those who died to keep us free, then our remembrance before God should involve us searching our hearts and asking if there is more we could do with our freedom, if there is a better way we can use it, in justice, in generosity, in building community. Humility before God is the best way to remember those who died for freedom.

We are living through a time in history when richer nations seem to be suffering from compassion fatigue and when life can feel dangerous. We are living in a time when some of us feel that we have no power or influence, and so it behoves us to look after number one. I gather that on Wednesday morning the Canadian immigration website crashed with the number of American people making inquiries. Jeremiah knew what it was to live in a dangerous situation – he lived when the Babylonians were at the gates, with half of the royal family already removed and a puppet king on the throne. Jesus knew what it was to live in a time when people had no influence on their national life: he lived under Roman occupation. But they spoke for God, who expected his people to still live in his way, to look out for others, to welcome strangers, to think about the needs of those who have nothing and to trust ourselves to God in deed as well as in word.

If our time spent standing at the war memorial today means that we leave with the peace of God more firmly embedded in our hearts, to share with others as we live in justice and peace from day to day, then we will indeed have been standing on holy ground, in the presence of God. If our remembrance leaves us either proud or bitter, then our remembrance will accomplish nothing, and may even have a negative effect on us and on our community.

People died in war, and they didn't want to, but they did, and that should keep us humble. Jeremiah was prepared to put his freedom and life on the line to get God's word out to the un-hearing people, and that too might humble us as we think of how concerned we too often are for our own comfort and safety. Jesus went willingly, reluctantly passionately, sorrowfully and lovingly to his death for us and for the world. He did it so that we would not need holy ground to come to God, so that we would know that we can come to God at any time, in any place. He did it so that we might know that we are loved beyond measure by the God of creation.

People heard Jeremiah when he spoke and heard Jesus gladly. But they did not act on what they heard. May we today do better, and listen to the word of God with more than curiosity. May we listen with our hearts and souls and live with faces and lives turned to God today and every day, no matter what. Amen.

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