Sermon for 12th in Ordinary Year A

Readings; Jeremiah 20:7-13; Matthew 10:24-39

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Jeremiah felt utterly betrayed by God. “Oh, Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived,” reproaches an angry Jeremiah. This sense of disillusionment had not come overnight. It had been building for a while. It had all started about 30 years before.

In approximately 637BC Jeremiah had received his first vision as a young man; he had seen a pot boiling with its steam being blown away by a northern breeze. He told the young King Josiah that destruction would come upon Judah from the north, unless the people came back to God.

At the time, this made no sense. Assyria had been a potent force when it had destroyed the northern kingdom in 721BC and had briefly threatened Judah in 701BC, but there was little threat in Jeremiah’s day, 64 years later.

So Jeremiah tried again; he bought a new waistcoat and buried it far to the north in the banks of the Euphrates near the ancient city of Babylon. He brought it back, soiled and crumpled:

Like the waistcoat that clings so tightly to the body, so God fashioned Judah to cling to him. But now they are soiled and useless, like this waistcoat dipped in a foreign river – as they have bathed in their foreign gods.

This persuaded Josiah and he embarked upon his famous “King Josiah’s Reform” in 632BC, abolishing foreign altars and centring worship under his watchful eye at the temple in Jerusalem. The Reform was boosted 10 years later when the builders discovered the Book of Deuteronomy laying forgotten in the temple in 622BC.

Jeremiah had won the day. A young prophet had renewed his nation in partnership with his young king. So Jeremiah went into retirement for the next 10 years. Then, suddenly, it all started to go wrong.

Josiah took the wrong advice. He was taken in by the prophetic hot heads of the day who scorned Jeremiah’s dire warnings about trouble from the north. So when Egypt decided to travel north through Judah in order to come to the aid of its northern ally, Assyria, who was being threatened by a new emerging power, the Babylonians, Josiah took it upon himself to refuse Pharaoh’s army free passage.

In 609BC Josiah was killed by the Egyptians at the Battle of Megiddo in a fight he should never have joined. Pharaoh NECO placed one of Josiah’s sons on the throne, Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim, sucking up to the Egyptians, started reversing many of the reforms of his father. Jeremiah felt like he had to start again. “You’ll be dead meat and buried alongside another ass,” quipped Jeremiah.

Jehoiakim took no notice. Then 4 years later in 605BC, the mighty Egyptians and their Assyrian allies were unexpectedly defeated by the up and coming Babylonian general, Nebuchadrezzar. In Babylon’s eyes, Judah was just a small Egyptian ally which could be gobbled up at will. Jeremiah suddenly saw the imminent fulfilment of his old prophecy of destruction coming from the north.

The sins of Judah are written on our hearts with a pen of iron,” said Jeremiah, and he bought a pot and smashed it to pieces on the ground, saying, “So will Judah be broken.” (This prophecy is the first half to the later famous section about God’s name being written by God on people’s hearts in a new covenant).

Then at the 11th hour, as Nebuchadrezzar’s army approached the gates of Jerusalem, he withdrew – leaving Jerusalem as miraculously saved as 96 years earlier when Sennacherib’s Assyrian army had also fled from besieging the city walls when visited by the ‘angel of the Lord.” No wonder they thought Jerusalem inviolable and said, “This is the temple of the Lord”, as if no harm could ever befall the city.

This is the reason for Jeremiah’s sense of betrayal. For 30 years he had been ridiculed for passing on what he believed to be a genuine prophecy about destruction coming from the north. Now, just as it was looking about to reach fulfilment at the hands of the Babylonians, they withdrew from the battle, leaving Jeremiah looking a complete fool yet again.

They nick-named Jeremiah, “Terror-on-every-side” and laughed at him. Freedom had come from the north, not destruction! Jeremiah accuses God of deceiving him. He is angry and feels betrayed.

Jeremiah had not been deceived, however. Within a year, Nebuchadrezzar was back with his army. It transpired that Nebuchadrezzar had suddenly broken off the siege and gone home when news reached him of his father’s death. Jeremiah’s opponents had claimed victory too soon. Jehoiakim had to pay heavy tribute money to Babylon from then on.

In the 4th year of paying tribute to Babylon, Jehoiakim decided to withhold tribute, much against Jeremiah’s advice. But Nebuchadrezzar had lost most of his chariots in another battle with Egypt, and the Babylonians were considered too weak to enforce their rule.

On 9 December 598BC, a re-equipped Nebuchadrezzar appeared outside Jerusalem looking for his money. Jehoiakim died of shock. His son, Jehoiachin took the throne, but after a siege of 3 months and 10 days, the city fell. On 15 March 597BC Jehoiachin and many of Jerusalem’s elite were taken in chains to Babylon, one of them was the prophet Ezekiel. One of Josiah’s sons, Jehoiachin’s uncle, Zedekiah was placed on the throne and told by Jeremiah to keep up the payments.

Jeremiah was hated by his countrymen for being right. Zedekiah respected him, but the other prophets accused Jeremiah of defeatism and lack of patriotic faith in God. Trust God, said Jeremiah, not in false prophets or military alliances.

Jeremiah took to wearing a yoke around his neck in the streets to depict their fate if ever Zedekiah should make the same mistake as his nephew, Jehoiakim and refuse tribute. When the false prophet Hananiah broke the wooden yoke, Jeremiah made one out of iron:

Babylon’s yoke is not so easily broken,” warned Jeremiah.

Finally, Zedekiah took the wrong advice and after 10 years of tribute money he refused to pay. Jeremiah warned him of the consequences, but after years of predicting destruction and death, at the last moment, just as everyone was coming to see that Jeremiah had been right all along and the Babylonians were returning to sort Judah out once and for all in 587BC, Jeremiah suddenly changed his tune.

Finally on the eve of being vindicated, Jeremiah started promising that the coming exile would not be the end of Judah after all. A remnant shall return, he promised, and in faith that one day Judah would rise again, Jeremiah went out and bought a field. He also promised a new covenant, written on the people’s hearts.

When the city fell in August 587BC, Jeremiah, freed by Nebuchadrezzar for having tried to keep Zedekiah faithful to his obligations, decided to go to Egypt in voluntary exile.

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The reason it is worth seeing the long term ebbs and flows in Jeremiah’s prophetic career is because he makes such a powerful example of what was to befall the Christian apostles.

They too would know more of defeat than success. Most would lose their lives at the hands of Imperial Rome.

They would be deemed unpatriotic for refusing to join the Zealots’ Messianic uprising against Rome. They too would be thought of as defeatist. They too would appear to promise a coming kingdom, and a victorious Jesus, that many said they failed to see.

The conditions facing those sent out by Christ is made plain in Matthew 10:24-39.

If Jesus is accused of being Beelzebub, his followers can expect nothing better. But the apostles are told they should not fear death; for the opponents of Jesus can only kill the body.

The apostles are assured that God knows of their plight, knows of the challenges and dangers they face, but has counted each hair upon their head, as a symbol of how closely God watches over them and can be relied upon in every time of danger.

For troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs on my head, and my heart fails within me (Psalm 40:12).

Troubles will be matched by blessings, assures Jesus. When the path of witness is long, dangerous and apparently without great success, it is tempting to think God has abandoned us or that it is not worth the pain. Jesus urges his followers to remain faithful.

The world will be divided in its response to their gospel message. Their message of peace will in fact be like a sword that splits fathers from sons and mothers from daughters. The way that lies ahead for the Church is one of strife, hardship, confrontation and pain. But the loss of one’s earthly prospects and the life the world might have offered which is denied to the follower of Christ is actually the way to finding one’s life, whilst those who forsake Christ and grab the life the world offers instead, these are the ones who may look as though they have exchanged the pain of the gospel for a better life, but in fact they are the ones who have lost everything.

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