

Bible Readings

Jeremiah 29:1; 4-14

These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸ For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord.

¹⁰ "For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare^[b] and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

Matthew 10: 34-42

³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

⁴⁰ "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. ⁴¹ The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴² And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward."

Sermon

“Turned upside down”, that is, if you look on the website, the title of the sermon of two weeks ago. Who would like to be in that position? Uneasy, uncomfortable, yet you see things from a different perspective.

You may remember the story about the father who played this game with his three children: they would say the opposite of what they meant. So: you are going to bed early this evening; tomorrow you can have a lie in; we are going to have brussels sprouts for dinner this evening.

It is exactly what Jesus does: turning things upside down, when He calls a tax collector to follow Him, someone who is shunned in the community. Jesus demonstrates that God’s perspective does not match the decent established, familiar norms. Jesus transforms them.

Last week’s sermon was called:.... in the midst of wolves

On this picture we do not see beautiful looking dogs. These are wolves. Would you want to be amongst wolves....? I didn’t think so, for you wouldn’t last long.

Yet, Jesus said to His disciples: I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves....

This compassionate man, can be so unbelievably sharp.

Again, in our New Testament passage of today, this sharpness by saying that He has not come to bring peace...Was that not what He came for?....Now this...? What does this mean...?

Let’s have a look at our Old Testament reading.

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:5-7)

Israel is in exile. Deported from Jerusalem into Babylon. Time to think about why they are where they are, with God’s instruction to settle as strangers. They are to submit to the Babylonian king, not resist him. For the time of exile would pass,

When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

Seventy years. “Seven” the number that symbolises fullness, completeness....as God has it. They did not have a bad life, there in that strange land of Babylon. However, during those seventy years, they were spoken to by prophets who gave a more optimistic plan of God. They changed God’s time of seventy years to an early return to their homeland. Of these prophets Jeremiah says,

“Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord”. (Jeremiah 29:8-9)

Do not let these false prophets make you turn away from God's way with you.

Yet, that is exactly what happens in Jerusalem in Judeah. There, the king and leaders do listen to the false prophet Hananiah. He tells the priests and the people that the Lord had broken the yoke of the king of Babylon, and that within two years the vessels that were taken into Babylon would be brought back.

They were Hananiah's words, not God's.

What is God's response to that? Severe judgment: sword, famine and pestilence will strike those in Jerusalem to those who fell for false prophecy.

The issue here is the seriousness of the matter: the matter being “listening to God”, as opposed to, “not listening to God”. We see the necessity to be wise in distinguishing between what comes from God from what does not come from God: to *want to be* wise to be able to do so.

False prophets bring false peace. There is that peace and there is Peace of God. Jesus does not bring peace that comes with, as Frank Sinatra sings, “my way”. God's peace that comes with choosing to live according to His way; which involves making painful decisions,

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew: 16:25)

In the book of Hebrews it says,

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

These words are rooted in Jesus own words, as they come to us today,

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword

This sword cuts through appearances, so that truths are revealed. For God is a God who sees the truths within us.

Trusting God's word means: not knowing what lies ahead of you, and while that is so, *still* not choosing the easiest way, but the unknown way of which you know that God lets the path emerge, in His time.

Jesus knew that the way that lay ahead of Him was the way of obedience to God. The most painful and shameful way. Why did He, despite knowing that, go that way...? He did so because it was the only way in which you and I could be saved from what would be the consequences of our disobedience to God. The consequence of being cut off from God forever.

Does that mean that we can do what we like because we are forgiven anyway....? No, we still face consequences of choices made against God's will; against His way; His plan....But God's Grace through Jesus Christ reaches beyond these wrong choices and their consequences. For after the consequences have been faced, when God is being sought, He will let Himself be found. Just as it was for the exiles in Babylon, to whom God said,

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the Lord (Jeremiah 29:13-14)

Our wrongdoings cannot eliminate the plan God has for us. Our mistakes cannot overrule the plan He has for us.

While that is so, we are still left with the difficult words,

For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

The love for Jesus and the Kingdom that He proclaims must exceed the love we have for our families. It does not say “*replace*” the bonds with our family with the love for Jesus. It is a matter of priority: He comes first! Again, as in our Old Testament reading, it is about the earnestness, sincerity; the profoundness of our faith in Him and which place we give Him in our lives.

If God sees in us sincere faith in Him, then we can leave our loved ones to Him, not because He loves them too, but because He loves them more than we ever can with our human love.

Amen