

Christ Church *Sermons*

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 30, 2007

The Reverend Nancy J. Allison

Jeremiah 32:1-3A, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Jeremiah Was Not A Bullfrog

It's hard to pass up the Rich Man and Lazarus. Sending rich people to Hell is always a crowd pleaser. But, all this month, and most of last, we've been reading about Jeremiah. And, since he is one of the really great characters of scripture, and seldom preached on, I thought I'd give it a try.

So, cast your mind back to the 6th Century B. C. This is often called the Axis Age when humankind, almost on cue, steps up to another level. Greek Philosophy is laying the foundations of thought, science and art for the Western world up to the present day. In the East, Confucius is defining the duties of government and the ethical standards of private and public life. In India and Southeast Asia, The Buddha is meditating on the causes of suffering and how human being can escape from that suffering. And in tiny Israel, the Lord God is calling men, and probably some women, to be his chosen Prophets.

We have some wrong ideas about prophets. The Prophets are not predictors of the future – they are truth-tellers in the present. They are frail human beings – flawed and limited as we all are – but, as the chosen of the Lord, they are drawn, often reluctantly, to share the vision of God, the anguish of God, and the judgment of God against their own people. Prophets are people who cannot win. They speak words of warning to a people who never listen. They offer guidance to those who will not heed. When others are predicting success, they preach doom. When others are at ease in Zion, they are overwhelmed with the burden of the Lord's wrath. When others are confident and secure, they are mocked and alone. But, when everything is lost and terror is all around, the prophets alone speak of hope and redemption.

The man who bore this terrible burden longest was the Prophet Jeremiah. He was called when he was just a boy – probably only 14 years old – and he died an old man in his mid-eighties. He was a member of a priestly family, important enough to be included in the king's court and involved in the political decisions of the day. In the beginning, it was exciting. Josiah, the boy king, set in motion a great reform movement to renew Israel's religious and civic life. His workmen found a scroll in the Temple that set out the Law of Moses. Today we would call it the Book of Deuteronomy. When he read it, Josiah was instantly aware of how far his people had fallen away from their Covenant with God. During his reign, laws were passed to restore that covenant loyalty through social justice and the purity of Temple worship. But, it didn't last.

Jeremiah watched it all. And, he became convinced that the people were just as bad under these new laws as they had been under the old. Law and ritual was not the answer. People would manage to follow their worst desires no matter what the law. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin? "he asks. "Can the leopard change its spots?" What he meant was that people don't change until they have a change of heart – and such change is not within their power because only God transforms the heart. When people

them. This fundamental insight of Jeremiah's about this inner relationship between man and God was revolutionary. From then on, the great religious thinkers, and certainly Jesus himself, will teach that religious conversion is an internal change, and real obedience to God is always from the heart.

But, nobody listened. Josiah was killed in battle, and new kings came to rule. They had no interest in purity of heart. They were only interested in who was going to win the battle for supremacy that swept throughout the Middle East. The great powers of the day were Egypt and Babylon. Jerusalem, the holy city of Judah, was caught between them. But, wasn't that the answer? Jerusalem was a Holy City. God wouldn't allow it to be destroyed. And, right in the middle of Jerusalem was the Temple; the place where God's Glory dwelt. That would protect them. As long as the Temple of the Lord remained, Jerusalem and its people would be safe.

Jeremiah was appalled by such stupidity. In a vision, he saw destruction pouring from the North, just as scalding liquid pours out of a cauldron when it is tipped over. Jerusalem will be destroyed by the power of Babylon just as sand is swept away by the sea. But, no one listened! "You're a spoil-sport, Jeremiah," they said; "a party-pooper, a real wet-blanket." "No one wants to hear your gloom and doom. If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." But, Jeremiah went right into the Temple and preached against it. "Mend your ways and your doings," he said. "Execute justice with another." "How can you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, run after false gods, and then come into this house and say, "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord – Here we will be delivered" "You make my house a den of robbers, says God." When Jesus cleanses the Temple, five centuries later, it is the anger of Jeremiah that is on his lips.

Because of his Temple Sermon, Jeremiah is arrested and beaten and placed in the stocks. Everyone knows, now, that they better not speak against the authorities, or against their policies, or against patriotic fervor they drum up. So, Jeremiah goes into hiding. And, while he is keeping out of the way of the Temple Police, he dictates his prophecy to his scribe, Baruch. He writes long poems of lament; cries of anguish that come from the depths of his despair. He reproaches God for his suffering. He vows that he will never utter another word on behalf of God. But, its no good. When he is silent, the word of the Lord burns within him like a fire that is shut up in his bones. He must speak, and since he's a hunted man, Jeremiah sends Baruch to Jehoiakim. He's the present King. And he is living in luxury in his winter palace. There is a brazier burning in the room. As Baruch reads the scroll of Jeremiah's prophecy, the King reaches over with a pen-knife and cuts it up and throws it into the fire, piece by piece. Jehoiakim doesn't care about the word of the Lord. He's already played his hand. In the great game of the Middle East, he is putting his trust, not in the Lord, but in the chariots of Egypt. Egypt's military power will keep him safe, and he will be rewarded for being on the winning side.

Well, guess again. The Egyptians lose and Jerusalem is surrounded by Babylonian forces. Jeremiah's gloomy predictions become only too true. During the siege, old people and young children die of starvation; strong men and women sicken and fall; people kill each other over a slice of bread. The scavenging birds are the only one's who eat. Jeremiah tells the people that God will not relent; the city and the Temple will be destroyed. Only those who surrender to the Babylonians will live. Traitor! How dare you weaken our resolve and sow dissention among of the troops. You're a traitor, Jeremiah, and we should kill you. But, they are afraid to go that far. So Jeremiah is thrown into a cistern in the court of the guardhouse. And, there he lies, sinking into the slime and hoping for

death. But, as the siege goes on, and it is apparent to everyone that Jeremiah was right, the King calls for his release.

So, Jeremiah is present to witness the surrender of the City, and to watch as its leading citizens are sent into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah writes to them in their exile. He tells them that God goes with them and that the future of the people rests with them and not with those who stay behind. Traitor! Conspirator! Why can't you ever be hopeful, Jeremiah? Why can't you say something good? Because, it's not over – because, with all this suffering, there is still no inner conversion. Hard-hearted people have to hit rock-bottom. And, so the game goes on. More deals; more strategizing; more trust in horses and chariots, until Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, has had enough. He comes back again and burns the Temple to the ground. He pulls down the city walls. Now, he sends everyone, with any skill at all, into exile – and there they were they will stay, until God, the only true mover of men and nations, sets them free.

And, that is when Jeremiah turns towards Hope. He buys his ancestral land and secures the deed to his home place. It is as clear a declaration as he can make that when all is lost, the future still remains in God's hands. And God's will is always to restore and redeem, to build and to plant.

All down the centuries nations and people have had reason to ponder the wisdom of Jeremiah. He gives no false hope. God alone orders the progress of this world, and those who follow their own ways are bound for destruction. Yet, none are beyond redemption.. And, for those who open themselves in truth, God's power of re-creation is endless. What he offers again and again to humankind is a relationship of covenant loyalty that will transform our inner being. "Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts." That's God's promise for our future, and it's the only hope that counts.