

## **Jeremiah: prophet for today?**

### **Glen Marshall**

“Seek the welfare of the city.” These words of Jeremiah have become common currency in our bit of the church since evangelicals began to recover their social conscience, so sadly misplaced during the early days of the last century. Granted, it would be stretching it to say this text now ranks alongside “For God so loved the world ...” as our favourite scripture, but it has become a familiar slogan.

Trouble is there is always a danger when verses become slogans. They lose their mooring in the text, get stripped of meaning, or worse still, become freighted with alien meaning. So if we truly cherish these words it might be a healthy exercise to reflect on them in their scriptural context.

They come, of course, from Jeremiah’s letter to the Jewish community in exile following the first Babylonian defeat of Judah and sacking of Jerusalem. The letter as a whole seeks to convey a twofold message.

### **Forget the Fantasy**

The exiles are urged to turn a deaf ear to the message of Hananiah and the rest of the prophets. God wants them to abandon all hope of an early return to Jerusalem.

It won’t be over by Christmas. Forget returning home for the next seventy years. Exile is a life sentence, so act accordingly. You are praying for Jerusalem when you should be praying for Babylon. Any hope you may have for the future lies here on alien soil.

The church in this country faces its own exile. Our society continues to journey ever further from many of it’s once (more or less) Christian values. Christian marriage is receding so far into the sepia tinted distance that, according to the office of national statistics, nearly half of all children are now born out of wedlock. Religious pluralism is so well established that we talk less and less of churches and more and more of faith communities. And if the flight from the churches continues many of you will live to see the death of at least half a dozen major British denominations.

Like Jeremiah I would suggest it is time for us too to embrace exile.

Hopefully we will soon tire of the tedious succession of false prophecies that have been telling us for at least thirty years that revival is just around the corner. We must foreswear our fond hankering after days when, “the balcony used to be full you know” and, “we didn’t have RE, we had scripture lessons”.

It is time to seek the welfare of the real world. Where Christianity in general and the church in particular is an increasingly marginal phenomenon. Where Islam and Sikhism, Buddhism and Hinduism have a place in our land and a part to play in shaping British identity. Where the farce of legally required, so called, Christian worship in state schools has clearly passed its sell-buy date.

I realise that to speak in this way is to cut across much evangelical / charismatic orthodoxy which tells us that all we need is stronger faith, longer prayer and the latest method from this

year's American success story and all will be well. But isn't it often the way that prophetic words are resisted by received orthodoxy?

Had there been a Jerusalem branch of Mainstream we would more likely than not have been on the side of Hananiah. He sounds so faith-full, whereas Jeremiah, as usual, comes across as the life and soul of the funeral. Just listen to him a couple of chapters earlier,

27:12 ... Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live. 13 Why should you and your people die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, as the LORD has spoken concerning any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon?

Not only were Hananiah and the rest more positive, they seemed to have scripture on their side as well. Hadn't God promised to protect and prosper the city and line of David at all costs? The sure and certain orthodoxy of the people of Jerusalem shut their ears to God's word. They were safe and sound. Indeed they were safe because they were sound.

So please don't be too quick to distance yourself from these people and automatically put yourself on the side of Jeremiah just because he turned out to be right and, of course, we belong to that part of the church that is right. What Jeremiah was proposing was, to the theological conservatives of his day, truly inconceivable. What makes us think we are any less prone to theological myopia?

Conservative orthodoxy can be the enemy of the prophetic because, in its commitment to defend forms of faith inherited from the past, it easily ends up locked in the past, deaf to the new thing God is seeking to do.

Please don't get me wrong – I too long for revival, as indeed did Jeremiah (28:5-6) but I suspect that God is calling us to forget the way things used to be, or how we wish they were, because there are things we need to unlearn, new insights we can only see in exile. Jeremiah's call to embrace exile is the very opposite of a counsel of despair. It is the path to hope and God's gift of radical newness.

### **Hold on to Hope**

If the first half of Jeremiah's letter is addressed to those tempted to escape into religious fantasy, the second is a word to any likely to respond with faithless despair. One threat to genuinely prophetic seeing and speaking and living is defensive orthodoxy, another is fatalistic liberalism.

This is a form of the faith that has no room for the decisive intervention of God, which cannot cope with miraculous, divine initiatives. It can only offer humanism with a religious veneer, where faith is constrained by the horizons of history. When such a vision holds sway, exile becomes our eternal home.

(Incidentally I am keeping this half of my exposition shorter than the first as I suspect that those of a fatalistic, liberal bent are not a major part of the Mainstream demographic.)

If God is anything at all he is the God of the gobsmackingly new. His catch phrase in the game show of life could well be, "Bet you didn't see that coming!" This is the God who delights in the journey through barrenness to life, from the old to the new, through the grave to life transformed. It would be entirely in keeping for him to lead us out of exile into an

undreamed of future. We just have to be careful not to try to force our way there ahead of him.

What is needed is both an embrace of exile *and* a vigorous hope of exodus. God is indeed tearing down and plucking up (chapter 1) and this must not be minimised. But God's ultimate intention is to plant and build up (chapter 1 again). God's chastening judgement is deep but his powerful purpose is ultimately indomitable.

So as we engage and wait, work and pray let's remember that the reason why exile must be embraced is that it is there that God has made himself available. It is not a matter getting out of the mess in order to get back to God, but of finding God in the mess: in weakness, in grief, in the wilderness, in our own land become alien, on the cross, in the grave.

### **Conclusion: Our Task God's Gift**

Having told them in v7 to *seek* Shalom for the city, in v11 God promises to *bestow* shalom upon his people. The letter envisages shalom as a task of the people and a gift of the almighty. As we seek shalom for others – the city, the empire and all its inhabitants – then we will find God giving shalom to us.

Or as Jesus put it:

Mark 8:35 ... those who want to save their life will **lose it**, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it?

(Bibliographical note: many of the ideas, and not a few of the words in this article can be found in Walter Brueggemann's *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* and Ronald Clements' *Interpretation Bible Commentary: Jeremiah*)