

A prophetic calling – the story of Jeremiah

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 25th August 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Jeremiah 1:3-10 (Lectionary OT reading for Year C, Proper 16)

Introduction

One August day, a crowd of over 100,000 peaceful protesters, including bands playing music and people carrying banners, assembled in a public open space to put their case for democracy. Within a short time, the ringleaders had been arrested, and a squadron of soldiers on horseback rode into the crowd, slashing at protesters with their swords. More than 15 people were killed, and up to 700 were injured. The scene was St Peter's Fields, Manchester, and the date was 16th August 1819¹, just two hundred years ago. The news of the Peterloo Massacre raised public sympathy for the victims, but the event also led to the authorities passing laws to repress further protest.

Protest has been much in the news. We are hearing nearly every day about anti-government protests in Hong Kong, and we wonder how long it will be before China cracks down as it does on dissidents on the mainland. This week the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg is sailing in a zero-carbon yacht to America to attend the New York Climate Summit. As you will know, she has been a leader in the international school climate strike movement.

How willing are you to stand up for what you believe? Have you ever signed a petition? Written to your MP? Gone on a march? Written a letter to a supermarket or other large company about a social issue?

Have you ever defended a colleague at work who was being bullied or badly treated? Or spoken up for someone in a group of friends or in your family? Do you avoid conflict at all costs, or are you willing to put yourself on the line for the good of others?

Last week Dave Percival preached about the cost of faith, looking at the examples given in Hebrews chapter 11 of people who stood up for their faith. Being a Christian isn't just about believing certain things with your head: it's about being committed to God and his will in a way that shows in your daily life. Jesus famously said,

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.' (Luke 9:23-24, NRSV)

The Prophet Jeremiah

Jeremiah is not one of the best-known characters in the Bible. He didn't part the Red Sea, slay a giant or get thrown into a den of lions. But he needed every bit as much bravery as Moses, David or Daniel. Over a period of 40 years, and the reign of 5 kings, Jeremiah was given messages from God to proclaim to the people of Judah and Jerusalem and to priests, prophets and kings. He was insulted, accused of being a traitor, rejected by the people of his own home town, frequently imprisoned, fed on bread and water, and lowered into a disused well to starve to death.

In the days when kings were all-powerful, what do you think it would take to go to the king and deliver this message?

Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place. [For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their

¹ See <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-peterloo-massacre>

servants, and their people. But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.] For thus says the LORD concerning the house of the king of Judah:

You are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon;
but I swear that I will make you a desert, an uninhabited city.
I will prepare destroyers against you, all with their weapons;
they shall cut down your choicest cedars and cast them into the fire.

And many nations will pass by this city, and all of them will say one to another, 'Why has the LORD dealt in this way with that great city?' And they will answer, 'Because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD their God, and worshipped other gods and served them.' (Jeremiah 22:3-10 NRSV)

Jeremiah lived in troubled times. When he received his calling to be a prophet, Josiah was on the throne, and Josiah introduced reforms to stop the worship of foreign gods and reintroduce obedience to the Law of Moses. But Josiah's son Jehoiakim reversed these reforms. Altars to foreign gods were reintroduced, even in the Temple of the Lord, and child sacrifice to the Ammonite god Molech took place outside Jerusalem², not to mention corruption and oppression of the poor and vulnerable.

On the international scene things were changing: the Assyrian Empire had been in decline, allowing Josiah considerable autonomy, but Judah was soon caught between a resurgent Egypt and the rising Neo-Babylonian Empire. Assyria was conquered by the Babylonians, and in 605 BC Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish. Four years later Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon, which brought Nebuchadnezzar back to Jerusalem in 598. He captured the city and exiled the new king, Jehoiachin, together with many leading people and their families, to Babylon, appointing Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah in his place. Zedekiah and his advisers ignored appeals from the prophet Jeremiah not to rebel against Babylon, and Jerusalem was again besieged and finally taken. This time Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple, broke down the city walls and took most of the remaining nobles off into exile. Jeremiah was spared, but then taken prisoner by Judean rebels who fled with him to Egypt, where he died.

All along, Jeremiah appealed to king and people to turn back to their God, follow God's laws wholeheartedly and put away false gods. If you don't, he said, God will let the Babylonians sort you out, and they will destroy everything you hold dear. God's forgiveness and protection was held out to his wayward people, but they refused to believe that the threatened disaster would actually happen. Jeremiah's writings show not only his uncompromising message, but also his self-doubt, his anguish at the fate awaiting his people, and his wrestling with the demands of what God was expecting him to do. God warned him not to marry and have children because of the disaster that was about to overtake the nation. Apart from his trusty scribe Baruch, Jeremiah had few friends. He had to face opposition from other prophets who claimed that all would be well, and frequently feared for this life. It was a lonely calling.

The Prophetic Calling

I expect you can think of people today who face death threats because of what they believe, or because they are willing to expose injustice and corruption. There are many countries in the world, including major trading partners of the UK, who persecute minorities and lock up or kill journalists and others who bring injustice to light or don't kow-tow to the official ideology. China and Saudi Arabia spring to mind.

So what about us? Is it sufficient for us to just thank God that we're not facing such opposition ourselves? Surely God isn't calling us to be prophets like Jeremiah?

Well, yes and no. Jeremiah's calling was very specific. He had a unique authority amongst the people of his time to bring God's message to the public sphere. You and I are probably not called to such an up-front, public role.

² Jeremiah 32:35

But we are all called to be disciples of Jesus. That is what our baptism is about. Being a disciple is more than just trying to be nice and turning up to church from time to time. We are called to follow Jesus – and that means putting his teaching into practice every day of our lives. The values of God’s Kingdom often conflict with the values, beliefs and practices that we see in our own society, never mind the wider world. We need to challenge ourselves about our attitudes to materialism, sexual morality, social justice and the environment. But at times our distinctive lifestyle as followers of Jesus will be a challenge to those around us. And God may call us to speak out, whether that is humbly sharing what we believe, or boldly challenging what is wrong, whether by confronting an individual, writing a letter, or attending a rally. You don’t have to predict the future to be a prophet. You just need to speak God’s message and bear witness to his truth.

When Jeremiah heard God calling him to be a prophet, he replied that he couldn’t possibly, as he was too young and didn’t know how to speak. God didn’t let him off the hook that lightly. God promised that he would give Jeremiah the words to say, and would protect him from harm. God kept his promise. Jeremiah’s book is the longest in the Bible, and most of it is filled with his prophecies – so he clearly had plenty to say. And although Jeremiah was always in danger, God helped him get through every peril, sometimes through the help of secret supporters.

There’s no excuse for us to avoid our calling either. As followers of Jesus, we need to take note of his challenge to take up our cross daily. Jesus told his disciples:

‘If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, “Servants are not greater than their master.” If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. (John 15:18-20 NRSV)

This passage from John’s gospel is also full of Jesus’ promises to send them the help of the Holy Spirit, who is also with us and in us, so that we too can have the boldness of Jesus. Jesus’ words to his disciples end with these words of encouragement:

Take courage! I have conquered the world!” (John 16:33)