

Jeremiah 2, 4 to 13, 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen

Today I'm continuing the story of Jeremiah with chapter 2 of his book, but before I start I want to give a short overview of Israel and Judah at the time of Jeremiah.

In about 950 BC Israel became divided north and south, and in 722 BC the northern kingdom of Israel and Samaria fell to the Assyrians.

Now Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet in 627 BC just about 100 years after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, and about 41 years before the southern kingdom of Judah fell in 586 BC to the Babylonians, when king Zedekiah reigned over Judah.

It was while reading what God wanted Jeremiah to tell his fellow country men, that they were an abomination, that I began to reflect on how Jeremiah must now be feeling, and what a tough life God had mapped out for him, and indeed what an extraordinary and brave man he was.

Jeremiah clearly had a strong faith that God would protect him otherwise he couldn't possibly have laid himself open in such a way to their hatred and probable revenge.

Now before God insisted that Jeremiah take the job as a prophet to all the descendants of Jacob and all the families of Israel; God had told him that he would utter his judgements against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem for their wickedness and for abandoning Him for other gods.

Now of course Jeremiah knew that in effect it would be him who would be doing the uttering on God's behalf, so it was to be Jeremiah who was to be on the front line of God's campaign to try and bring his people back to him, before it was too late.

So God instructs Jeremiah to gird up his loins, stand up and tell them everything I tell you, and that if you do I will protect you, but if you fail me then woe betide you, for then I shall fail you.

But that also indicates how much God held Jeremiah in very high regard, and clearly trusted him to do as he asked of him, because actually God knew that Jeremiah wouldn't fail him, even though he was originally a very reluctant prophet.

At verse 5, Jeremiah starts his ministry with the words, "Thus says the Lord." "What wrong did your ancestors find in me."

Now God didn't jump in and start by saying it's all your fault that things have gone wrong, and that you've abandoned me, he starts by examining his own conduct, and that, in itself, is a very good lesson for us to learn when something goes wrong in our lives; by asking ourselves, 'was it something that I did to cause the problem.'

So God's question to the Israelites starts with the premise that they abandoned Him because of something objectionable about God, that the Israelites abandoned God to go and worship idols because of what God had done; in this case of course this was totally wrong, the Israelites had abandoned God entirely through their own sin.

And precisely the same thing happens today; we abandon God, not because of what God has done, but because we put all the blame on God for all the problems we have, which, if we looked at our problems rationally, we would realise that most of our problems, if not all of them, are of our own making.

And God goes on to say in verse 5, “And went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves.”

St Paul in his letter to the Colossians urges us to cloth ourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in the image of God, and not to set our minds on things of the earth such as evil desire, and greed, because if we do, we become worthless as far as God is concerned, not only to ourself, but also to other people.

In verse 6 God recounts how the Israelites had forgotten Him and the way he had rescued them when they were slaves in Egypt; how he had led them through the desert where no one can survive without God's help due to the heat and lack of food and water, clearly accusing them of ingratitude for which they should now be ashamed.

And in verse 7 God reminds them that it was he who gave them the land of milk and honey and all good things, but that it was them who defiled the land and made God's inheritance an abomination.

God was angry with the Jews for bringing his name into disrepute because of the way they behaved, and because it reflected badly on God, in the same way that when children behave badly it reflects badly on their parents.

This too is undoubtedly a lesson for us to learn, because the way we behave today as Christians also reflects either well or badly on God's church.

In verse 8 God said that even the priests did not say, “Where is the Lord? Those who handle the law do not know me.”

I don't think that God was accusing them of abandoning him, rather of treating him with contempt, by their corrupt actions in the way they were interpreting God's law in his name, and bringing his statutes and laws into disrepute, and probably using them to their own advantage.

As religious leaders the priests had lost their way, and as far as God was concerned they were an abomination.

So, it was not just one section of Judah which had gone astray, it was the ordinary folk, and also those in authority such as the priests, scribes and rulers whose job it was to teach and interpret God's law and statutes.

As for the prophets they certainly abandoned God, because we are told that they turned to the pagan god Baal who was worshipped at that time by the Canaanites, the non Jewish people who also lived there.

Baal was a god of fertility who was believed to enable the earth to produce crops, and people to produce children. They also practised human sacrifice, usually children, see Jeremiah 19 verse 5; Jesus calls Satan Beel-zebub, linking the devil and Baal together.

St Paul in his letter to the Colossians in chapter 2 verse 4 writes, that if we keep focussed on the things above, that is, on God and on Christ, then when Christ appears in glory we will appear with him.

And in the following verse, St Paul urges us to put to death whatever belongs to our earthly nature, because it's through those earthly desires that the wrath of God is coming.

Verse 9 reads, "Therefore once more I accuse you; says the Lord, and I accuse your children's children."

God is saying through Jeremiah at verse 9, that up to now, he has been speaking against their ancestors, who he brought out of Egypt and who he gave the promised land too.

But when he is speaking of their children's children, he is speaking of Jeremiah's contemporaries, of the current generation of Judah and Israel.

So in verse 10 and 11 God is saying to the current population of Judah, 'If you go to Cyprus or to Kedar, for example, and examine them with care although you may find they worship other gods nevertheless they are at least faithful to their gods and beliefs, whereas you are not faithful to me.

Clearly God has more regard for those, that although they do not know the one true God, nevertheless, are faithful to their gods and beliefs, than he has for his own people who, even though they know that the God of Israel is the only true God, nevertheless are unfaithful to him.

And that too can be a lesson for us as well because drifting away from God, who we've got to know as the one and only true God, could well be worse than not knowing him in the first place, because in verse 12 God says, "Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord."

St Paul on several occasions urges us to stay faithful to Christ, for example in 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse 7 Paul writes, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

That's what God requires of all of us, we are to keep faithful to Christ, there is to be no backsliding.

Verse 13, sums up the two problems; the first is clear enough, they have forsaken God the fountain of living water, the second complaint seems to be that they make cisterns that leak water, but needless to say that's not God's complaint, God is speaking about idolatry.

God is repeating that it is one thing to abandon me, but it is another thing to abandon me and then practice idolatry by taking up other gods, who, like leaky cisterns, cannot hold living water, or indeed do anything good at all, for which, as I've already said, God is utterly appalled.

So let us be faithful to our calling, and then as St Paul said to the Colossians in chapter 3 verse 4, “When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory”.

Jeremiah may well have lived 2,600 years ago, but his message to stay faithful to God, is as relevant for us today, as it was to the Israelites all that time ago.

As we sit let us pray

Almighty God in whom we live and move and have our being, we humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit that in all the cares and occupations of our daily life we may stay faithful to you and your teaching, and we ask this through your most precious Son our saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.