

Lessons from the Potter's house

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A sermon given on Sunday 8th September 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: Jeremiah 18:1-11

Introduction

We are all aware of the terrible destruction caused by Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas in the past week. These freak weather events seem to be happening more and more often, devastating communities and destroying lives, property and livelihoods.

But even in the midst of such catastrophe there are seeds of hope. Let me share with you a story of hope from Tear Fund from the Indonesian tsunami that happened at the end of September last year.

A story of hope

Abyasa was getting ready for work when his house began to shake. He grabbed his two children and rushed out of the house. They couldn't believe what they were seeing – the ground around them was turning to waves of liquid earth.*

It was 28 September 2018, and an earthquake and tsunami had hit Sulawesi in Indonesia. More than 4,000 people were killed and around 10,000 injured. Thousands of homes collapsed along with hospitals, hotels and shops. Many livelihoods were swept away by the waters.

Thankfully, Abyasa's family survived the disaster and were able to find accommodation in a safer area. Fifty days later he managed to return to what was left of his home.

The earthquake had caused his house to move 700 metres from where it originally stood. Nothing was left standing. When he found one of his children's teddy bears in the mud, he began to cry, overwhelmed by the situation.

Abyasa feared that he would never recover his medical card and identification. The family had fled as quickly as they could, taking only the clothes they were wearing.

Yet amazingly, after picking through the rubble, Abyasa found his wallet, with all his cards and documents still intact. Even in the midst of disaster, he was able to thank God for this small mercy.

Abyasa is now employed by Tearfund's local partner, Food for the Hungry Indonesia (YFHI). He is thankful for the opportunity to serve others who have gone through the same devastating experience. Being a survivor himself, he is a great encouragement to his colleagues and the communities he is serving.¹

What's your source of hope?

The good fortune of Abyasa and his new work helping to rebuild his community remind us that there are always possibilities of new life reasons for hope.

I wonder what is your source of hope? Is it personal experience of overcoming adversity, passing through difficult times and coming out the other end? Is it the example of people

¹ Tearfund One Voice weekly prayer email, 12 July 2019

you know or who inspire you? Is it your beliefs about life, God, the universe, or trust in particular individuals?

Lessons from Jeremiah: Consequences

Over the past 2 weeks we have considered the calling and message of the prophet Jeremiah, who was called by God to the unenviable task of pointing out to the people of Judah firstly that they were being unfaithful to God, in spite of all that he had done for them, and secondly that unless they repented and put their house in order God would allow disaster to overtake them. God's people thought they could worship pagan gods as well as, or instead of, the one true God who created the world and who had rescued their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. In addition, there was corruption in high places, and oppression of the poor and vulnerable². As you read through the book there are repeated calls to repentance from God through Jeremiah, but they fall on deaf ears. Jeremiah also gives the kings of Judah advice from God about how they should deal with the superpowers of Egypt and Babylon, but his advice is ignored. As time goes on, Jeremiah's prophecies become very explicit, such as this message to King Zedekiah:

Thus says the LORD: I am going to give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire. And you yourself shall not escape from his hand, but shall surely be captured and handed over to him; you shall see the king of Babylon eye to eye and speak with him face to face; and you shall go to Babylon. (Jeremiah 34:2-3)

Jeremiah also faces opposition from false prophets, who tell the people that all is well, that the Babylonians will not take the city, and from officials who accuse him of siding with the Babylonians and discouraging the soldiers from fighting them. But he courageously holds on to his message: you cannot go on disobeying God and then expect him to deliver you from your enemies. Your behaviour has consequences. If you don't want to experience the consequences, change your behaviour.

It's a tough message, and it takes courage to deliver it. People today also need to be warned of the consequences that will flow from the wrong attitudes, beliefs and behaviour that are current in our world. Climate change and the destruction of the natural world is one area where it seems people are beginning to wake up and see the reality of what we have been doing. But whether decision-makers are taking the crisis seriously enough to make the radical changes that are needed to avert disaster remains to be seen.

We also face serious dangers from other kinds of attitudes and behaviour that need to be brought to people's attention. We have a serious moral crisis in our modern Western, liberal culture, brought about by changes in the accepted norms of sexual behaviour and personal responsibility. Some of the consequences include increasing family break-up, a crisis in adolescent mental health and an epidemic of pornography which is distorting young people's understanding of relationships and leading to sexual impotence in young men. It is the equivalent in our time of the Jews worshipping the fertility god Baal in the time of Jeremiah.

Gambling is another scourge of our age. The Gambling Commission's figures suggest 450,000 children aged 11-16 bet on a regular basis, while 55,000 children were classed as problem gamblers.³ The Bishop of St Albans, who speaks for the Church of England in the

² E.g. Jeremiah 7:3-7, 34:8-17

³ Reported in <https://care.org.uk/news/latest-news/number-child-gamblers-quadruples-just-two-years>

House of Lords, said: “Children are the next target of an industry making billions in profits which shows little inclination to take any form of responsibility.”⁴

We will be aware of other ways in which our society has replaced God’s laws and values with misguided ideologies and the pursuit of individual freedom and pleasure above responsibility to neighbour and accountability to God. We are already reaping what we have sown.

Compassion

You might have got the impression that Jeremiah’s messages were all doom and gloom. But this is not so. Even in the midst of warnings about the disaster that threatens his people, Jeremiah also brings messages about forgiveness, healing and restoration. While the Babylonians are besieging the city of Jerusalem, God tells Jeremiah to buy a field, and get the deed of purchase witnessed and placed in a secure earthenware jar so that it will last for a long time.

“For thus says the Lord of hosts, the god of Israel; houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.” (Jeremiah 32:15). God promises that after the Exile he will restore his people to their land⁵, and gives Jeremiah a message about a new covenant in which every one of his people will know him⁶.

Jeremiah writes a letter to those Jews who have already been taken into exile, telling them to settle down there, prosper and seek the welfare of the place where they have been taken.

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. (Jer. 29:11-12).

God’s willingness to let us experience the consequences of our rebellion against him is not in conflict with his compassion for his people when they suffer. We see this supremely in the way Jesus related to people who were considered “sinners” and outcasts in his society. Think about the tax collectors and prostitutes who found in Jesus acceptance, forgiveness and a chance for a new start. Our baptism is a sign to us of God’s infinite mercy and love. He is always willing to wash away our sins and give us a new start.

Change

And so we come to today’s reading about Jeremiah at the potter’s house. Jeremiah sees a potter at his wheel, and God speaks to him through what he observes. If you’ve ever tried making a pot using a potter’s wheel, you will know something of the challenge that the potter has, to shape the clay into the desired form. Centring it on the wheel is the first challenge. But as you try to shape it, it can all too easily go wonky, or even shoot off the wheel altogether. This, God said to Jeremiah, is what it’s like for me trying to work with my people.

⁴ Daily Express, 13th January 2019 <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1071410/gambling-addiction-children-bishop-alan-smith>

⁵ Jeremiah 16:14-15

⁶ Jeremiah 31:31-34

As Jeremiah watches, the pot that the potter is shaping is spoiled. But that is not the end for the piece of clay. The potter squashes it down, throws it back on the wheel and makes a new pot out of it. In the same way, God tells Jeremiah, I can make something new out of this people. In my wisdom and power I can respond to my plans going wrong. I can create something new. If a nation are going wrong, but repent, I will change my plans accordingly and not allow the disaster that they deserve to fall on them. Equally, a nation I am planning to bless because of their obedience may turn away from me, and I will no longer pour out my blessing.

We can apply Jeremiah's message to our nation, the church and the individual. Just as God can bring hope and new beginnings to a nation devastated by a tsunami, or released from a repressive regime, so he can bring revival and renewal to his Church, both at a national level and locally. He can also bring renewal and new opportunities to our own lives and our families.

The lesson of the potter's wheel is that no situation is ever hopeless. With God there is always hope, no matter how bleak things may look at any time. We may have messed up, gone astray, forgotten God. But God has not forgotten us.

If we change our ways, God will also change his plans.

God wants to work with us.

Will we allow him to shape us and make of us something beautiful and useful for his purposes?

*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord,
plans for your welfare and not for harm,
to give you a future with hope. (Jer 29:11)*