

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14:7-14

Honey from the rock

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

A “Jeremiah” is a word for a pessimistic prophet who foresees a calamitous end. That is unfair to the prophet who addressed us so powerfully this morning. True, he lived through a disastrous time in the history of the people Israel, he saw the signs plainly. He had his own exile in Egypt, but he knew the destructive power of the neighbouring nation of Babylon and in his last chapters, he returns to a message of hope.

The psalm we have just read has the same message in brief, and was written around Jeremiah’s time – so Howard Wallace assures me. It begins “Sing merrily to God our strength”, recognizes that God’s people preferred their own counsels and were ‘sent away’, but ends with that intriguing image of the honey from the Rock. The moderns among you will also recognize a recent Hillsong hit with that name, which combines several such images to form a song of hope – there’s water from the rock too, and manna on the ground, all of them difficult to imagine, which is the point. Grace often appears in unexpected, even impossible places! In the same spirit, in the early centuries of the Christian faith, the newly-baptized were welcomed to the Lord’s Table with a cup of milk and honey.

So between promise and hope, both the Old Testament readings remember the troubles of the journey of the Exodus. Jeremiah has hard words to say about their faithlessness as they marched towards the land of milk and honey.

The final verse of our reading sums it all up in a watery image:

¹³ My people have committed two sins:
they have rejected me,
the source of living water,
and they have dug out for themselves cisterns,
cracked cisterns which can hold no water.

These were the people who were called ‘holy to the LORD’ (2:3). This is covenantal language, expressing a sacred bond between the people and their God; yet they had abandoned the God who called them out of enslavement and had led them to a land where they could flourish in the freedom which faith in the LORD gives. On the journey, they received the Ten Words to live by. It is unfortunate that they gained the title “Commandment”; the Hebrew simply has “words” and commandment opened the door to legalism and punishment; they were words of fullness of life. Yet, settled in the Promised Land, they strayed from their high calling and pursued what passed for religion where they now dwelt.

Thus the LORD's question:

⁵What fault did your ancestors find in me,
that they went so far astray from me,
pursuing worthless idols and becoming worthless themselves?

The religion of the ancient East took many forms but the most popular was the fertility god, Baal, for reasons obvious to us! It suited their most carnal desires and demanded nothing of their way of life. One commentator (R. E. Clements) says, “*Religion cannot remain true religion if it bypasses genuine moral concern for the welfare of society*”. Faithful believing and living demands the distinction between true and false, otherwise you are living an illusion. The illusions are on offer every day in our present world culture, in the news, in the evening's entertainment on TV, in the commercials, and through those mobile telephones.

So Jeremiah goes on to notice others who also lost their way:

⁶ The priests did not ask, 'Where is the LORD,
who brought us up from Egypt
and led us through the wilderness,
through a barren and broken country,
a country parched and forbidding,
where no one ever travelled,
where no one made his home?'

His words even heighten the difficulty of their trek.

Perhaps the question “Where is the LORD” might be put differently: “What is the LORD *doing*?” Where is God in our experience, in our life, our culture, our nation? Where does the LORD discover himself to us? It was the priests' *business* to know that.

The “people who handled the law”, a nice phrase - and the prophets, all of whom had a holy obligation to the God of the Exodus, all failed. The lawyers did not know the source of justice and morality – they rejected the very source of living water; the prophets preferred to trust in Baal, a god they made with their own hands. Yet, ⁷ “I brought you into a fertile land to enjoy its fruit and every good thing in it”. So,

¹³ My people have committed two sins:
they have rejected me,
the source of living water,
and they have dug out for themselves cisterns,
cracked cisterns which can hold no water.

“Foolishness followed faithlessness” comments Howard Wallace, as it inevitably does. Of course, not all priests, not all prophets, not all rulers of the Law were faithless, as the scriptures themselves attest.

Jeremiah took care to address all of them, people, priests and prophets. He spoke to Judah and to the families of the house of Israel. With St Paul, he believed that “*all* have sinned and all are deprived of the divine glory” (Rom. 3:23 REB).

The lectionary's choice of *Hebrews* to accompany Jeremiah is helpful. The chapter consists of a series of instructions to Jewish Christians. Every one of them deserves a sermon. They begin with the beautiful “*H φιλαδελφία μενέτω*”, “brotherly love, let it remain” – but that won't do these days, so “let mutual affection continue”. Be hospitable to strangers, Resist the love of money. Remember in prayer those who lead you in the faith. Live life as a continual sacrifice of thanksgiving to God. Do not neglect to do good and share what you have.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is contrasting troubling table manners with what true hospitality involves: not the admiration of the wealthy and influential, but of aligning ourselves with "the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. This is the way to find happiness, because they have no way to repay you." (14:13-14). And with their modern additions: those who suffer from the wars of 'strong men', and all whose lives are turned upside down because of our neglect "to care for our common home" as Pope Francis put it.

No-one will pretend that this is any easier than some parts of the Ten Commandments, but we are bidden to remember the generosity of God, and the indiscriminate divine love in Christ Jesus – and how we live derives its truth and its strength from there.

Jeremiah has several more chapters of indictment. There will be a call to repentance, and there will be a final judgement, but not ours.

And so we come before God in repentance, that is, to turn our lives again on to the path of Christ, to make our offerings of our concern in prayer, and to offer our gifts in response. And then to the table of the eucharist, the place of thanksgiving where sinners are welcome.
