**Sunday 15 September 2019 (Pentecost 14)**

**‘The scolding prophet’ (Jeremiah 4:11-12,22-28)**

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**Intro**

Well if you’re visiting St John’s today you’ve picked a doozie. Yes we have doughnuts for morning tea, but the passage we’re looking at today has a lot to get your head around.

**Jer. 4:22** “My people are fools;

they do not know me.

They are senseless children;

they have no understanding.

They are skilled in doing evil;  
they know not how to do good.”

It’s a heavy text we’re chewing over. These are scolding words from Jeremiah, often called the weeping prophet, but I want to encourage you to keep focussing on the scripture because if we don’t at least try to understand the tricky parts of the Bible we’ll miss the richness of this amazing book.

Last week we saw how God took a prophet called Jeremiah down to a potter’s house and taught him a lesson about his plans for the world. God shapes us, moulds and helps us to grow, in light of his plans and design, but it doesn’t always feel nice and the road is rarely smooth.

A prophet is someone who hears from God and shares the words God gives them with those around them. Prophets in the Bible speak to the world around them on God’s behalf but it’s a world that doesn’t really care what God has to say. You’ll notice that last week we looked at Jeremiah 18 and this week we’re looking at Jeremiah 4 but while we’re going backwards in the book we’re not necessarily going backwards in Jeremiah’s story. As Zoë pointed out last week Jeremiah is a collection of the prophets works.

The first 24 chapters begin with Jeremiah’s calling story (more on that later) but the rest of this section is made up of warnings for Israel, Jeremiah’s people. The warnings are clear but the message goes unheard. While Jeremiah lives and speaks God’s words during a time of religious reform under the good king Josiah, the people ignore him, and things go from bad to worse. God’s people break their promises to God to follow his laws, they worship made-up gods going so far as to offer their children as sacrifices to them, and because they don’t care about God’s laws and follow false gods there is rampant social injustice.

Throughout the Bible God’s command is that his people take care of the weakest members of their community. God’s people are to care for widows, orphans, and foreigners because these people often got taken advantage of. For almost 24 chapters Jeremiah tells the people that there will be consequences for their oppression of the weak. Already 10 of the twelve tribes of Israel had been conquered and carried off into slavery by the Assyrains who came from the north. Now a new threat in the north brewing. The Babylonians are rising to power and Jeremiah warns his people that if nothing changes they will feel the consequences of their actions.

**An undignified prophet**

It’s helpful at this juncture to have a think about who exactly Jeremiah is. Often when we think about prophets we think of fortune tellers or crazy people who spend their lives shouting about doom and gloom.

When my parents were travelling through the USA a wild-eyed man jumped on the bus and yelled: “Armageddon is coming soon!”, quick as a flash Dad shouts: “I’m a geddin off this bus right now!”

It’s a familiar story as no one likes bad news but let’s not write off Jeremiah just yet. Jerry was just a young priest starting out his career when God spoke to him in a vision. Jerry tried to convince God that he wasn’t up for the job.

Jeremiah 1 gives us the rest of story:

**Jer. 1:4**    The word of the LORD came to me, saying,

**Jer. 1:5**    “Before I formed you in the womba I knew*a* b you,

before you were bornc I set you apart;d

I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.e”

**Jer. 1:6**    “Alas, Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak;a I am too young.”b

**Jer. 1:7**    But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. **8** Do not be afraida of them, for I am with youb and will rescuec you,” declares the LORD.d

**Jer. 1:9**    Then the LORD reached out his hand and toucheda my mouth and said to me, “I have put my words in your mouth.b

Jeremiah isn’t a fearmongering crazy. He’s just a young kid minding his own business but God has bigger plans for him. God chooses Jeremiah as his mouthpiece, calling out injustice and oppression. But Jeremiah doesn’t have some amazing platform. He’s not a preacher with authority like me. He’s more like the Lorax.

‘The Lorax’ is the serious tale of the Once-ler who finds a beautiful valley full of truffler trees and proceeds to cut one down. The Lorax emerges from the stump of the tree. He was:

Shortish, and oldish, and brownish and mossy, and who spoke with a voice that was sharpish, and bossy’ Mister he said with a sawdusty sneeze, I am the Lorax I speak for the trees for the trees have no tongues’. The Lorax scolds the Once-ler for his greed who takes no notice. He doesn’t care and he proceeds to cut down all the trees, pollute the valley, and all the beautiful animals are forced to leave the valley. Finally the last truffler tree is chopped down and the Once-ler realises the extend of the destruction he is responsible for. It’s a tragic tale but this is the story of the prophets. They speak for the voiceless but their words go ignored and finally all that’s left are the sad consequences of our disdain for the prophets.

Friends once we see Jeremiah as more of a Lorax than a domineering fear-mongerer. As someone who can see what we’re really doing to ourselves and the outcome of our actions we can, appreciate that he’s worth listening to.

**The scolding prophet**

Jeremiah is an undignified prophet but he’s also a scolding prophet. Look with me at v.22:

“My people are fools;

they do not know me.

They are senseless children;

they have no understanding.

They are skilled in doing evil;

they know not how to do good.”

**23** I looked at the earth,

and it was formless and empty;

and at the heavens,

and their light was gone.

**24** I looked at the mountains,

and they were quaking;

all the hills were swaying.

**25** I looked, and there were no people;

every bird in the sky had flown away.

**26** I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert;

all its towns lay in ruins  
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

Jeremiah scolds his people, they are like foolish children he says, they’re experts in evil and they’re about to feel the weight of their sin. The vision of judgement Jeremiah receives is one of creation in reverse. In Genesis 1, God creates the world by speaking it into existence but here the fruitful land becomes desert, birds and people disappear, the mountains deconstruct, the light goes dark, and the earth which God spoke form into become formless. Like the Once-ler the sin the people bring into the world brings about the reversal of creation.

In v.27 the Lord himself speaks:

**Jer. 4:27**   This is what the LORD says:

“The whole land will be ruined,a

though I will not destroyb it completely.

**28** Therefore the earth will mourna

and the heavens above grow dark,b

because I have spoken and will not relent,c  I have decided and will not turn back.d”

As Zoë mentioned last week this warning is not an empty threat. In 586 Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians who invade from the north. It’s a tragic part of the Bible but the people reject warning after warning. As we go through our series on minor prophets you’ll see that God sends prophet after prophet but the people don’t listen. This scolding, this warning from God goes unheard.

As people we’re great at ignoring warning signs. Yesterday the Brownes piled into the car and set out for Brisbane. At the servo genius here filled up the car with petrol. The only problem is our family car has a diesel motor. I ignored the warning sings in the car, on the fuel cap, and at the bowser and it wasn’t until Zoë screamed ‘David stop!’ that I realised my mistake. In life so often we ignore all the warning signs until it’s too late.

Jeremiah gives us a peek into what it’s like to be God. He’s ignored and considered irrelevant until it’s too late.

**A prophetic outlook**

So what do we do with this passage? Is it just a sad story, an artifact of history? No! Here is an invitation for us to catch God’s vision for the world and develop a prophetic outlook.

Last Wednesday we remembered 9/11. Perhaps you remember where you were on the day the twin towers fell? Even if you can’t the ripples from that day have been felt ever since. From oil prices to air travel our world was turned upside down 18 years ago.

In 1990, Rick Rescorla, the Director of Corporate Security at Morgan Stanley published a report detailing the vulnerability of the World Trade Centre. He found that you could freely walk into the garage of the center and that no security checks were done on any of the delivery vehicles entering. Three years later a truck bomb was driven into the garage and detonated. Rick’s warning went unnoticed but after this event Rick and a colleague warned that the next attack on the trade center would come from the air. The evacuation plans and drills he put in place saved lives on September 11. When the first tower was hit Rick ignored PA announcements, telling people to stay where they were, and lead 2,687 of his colleagues to safety. When one of his colleagues told him that he too had to evacuate he told them “As soon as I make sure everybody else is out.” He was last seen on the 10th floor, heading upward shortly before the South Tower Collapsed.

Like Jeremiah, Rescorla, gave his life trying to warn his people that complacency and apathy are often our worst enemy. Friends there are consequences for our sins and we can’t live as if our greed, lies, selfishness, hatred, and our indifference to the suffering of others and to the plight of our planet will not affect us in the long run.

So we’re left with three options: We can continue to ignore God’s word and Israel’s experience with Babylon tells us that isn’t a good idea, we can run away from God, and if you read the book of Jonah you’ll see how that works out, or we can develop a prophetic outlook catching God’s vision for his world and seeing our role in God’s plans.

The reading from Luke’s gospel today really illustrates what God’s heart for his world is like:

**Luke 15:3**    Then Jesus told them this parable:

**4** “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? **5** And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders **6** and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ **7** I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Here we see why God uses Jeremiah to warn his people. He does so because he loves them. Like lost sheep we all go our own way, that’s what sin is, ignoring God’s will for our lives and going it alone. After the Babylonian invasion Israel never regained its former glory. Kingdoms rose and fell. Lowly prophets again and again tried to get the people to turn back to God but their hearts were too hard and their sin was too deep. There seemed like no solution, would this downward spiral of sin, abuse, and utter distain for the word of God ever stop?

Hundreds of years later a Galilean carpenter comes on the scene and preaches repentance just like the prophets before him. Like them most people ignore him but some don’t. Unlike the prophets Jesus claims that he is the fulfilment of prophesy, he is the good shepherd that the prophets spoke about, he is the one who will draw back the lost sheep of Israel. A small group of disciples form and they catch Jesus’ prophetic outlook. They begin to pray for people and see them healed, they begin to call people to repentance, and miraculously, they change their ways. There is another crucial difference between Jesus and all the other prophets, while other prophets spoke about God’s judgement falling on others, Jesus said God’s wrath would be poured out on himself. He claims to be the suffering servant of Isaiah, he claims to be the one who will be crushed for our sins.

Jesus not only warns of judgement and calls people back to God but he fulfils the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah and is crushed on the cross for our sins. The judgement that we deserve is poured out on Jesus at the cross. He dies in our place so that we don’t have to face the horrors of our sin, instead he does.

Friends let’s never forget the power of the cross. Let’s hear Jeremiah’s scolding rebuke and heed his warning to repent but let’s never forget that the pain and the agony of the cross belongs to us but when we entrust our lives to Jesus, this condemnation passes from us to him. Jesus rescues us so that we might catch his prophetic outlook and live for him.

**Conclusion**

At Parish Council two weeks ago we began as a council to think and pray about the future. We thanked God for the past and we remembered our responsibility to care for our present needs but we also began to ask ourselves, what is God’s vision for our parish in the future. What does God want us to do with our time? How does God want to use us to call the lost sheep of Dalby back to him. In 2016 10% of people in Dalby put down on the census that they were Anglicans. While we’re a strong and healthy church, we don’t see that 1200 people engaging with our church annually, let alone weekly.

Friends I must confess that at the petrol bowser yesterday I was a bit like a lost sheep. I was tired and distracted and I was doing life on autopilot. I wasn’t present in what I was doing. There are literally thousands of tired, distracted, disappointed, and lost people in our town who need to know Jesus and recognise that he wants more for their lives than they are currently getting in their own strength.

What stuns me as I read the accounts of Jesus’ life in the Bible is that so many people saw him face to face but ignored him or outright rejected him. God in the flesh stood before them and they cursed him to his face. These were nice religious people who knew the laws in the Bible back to front but they were tired, and distracted and so caught up in their own agendas that they couldn’t see God even though he was right in-front of them. But notice that Jesus says that he comes to fufill all that is written about him in the law and prophets. Only those who had caught God’s prophetic outlook were ready for Jesus when he came. The prophets envisaged a better world where God’s rule and reign is known and felt. Let’s be a people who are so on fire for God that we live in joyous anticipation, serving Jesus and loving those around us so they too may meet him with joy when he comes.

One of my favourite quotes from the Lorax is this:

"**Unless someone like you** cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."

As we go through this series on the prophets in the Bible I really feel God is calling us to develop a prophetic outlook individually and corporately as a church. Will we keep doing business as usual? Will we become more introspective and think about how we can make St John’s a better place for ourselves? Or will we heed the prophets warnings, and recognise God’s heart for those who don’t know him in our city.

Our mission in Dalby is to ‘know Jesus, and to make Jesus known through caring, worshipping, teaching, and reaching out’ and this is brilliant vision. In order to fufill this mission we need to be asking ourselves how can we use our time, talents, and treasures to reach those who don’t know Jesus. How will we make Jesus known in the coming years? These are the questions we need to ask ourselves and we need to be praying that God would give us a prophetic outlook, a desire to give every single person the best possible opportunity to know Jesus as deeply as possible. If you feel like you don’t know Jesus as well as you would like to, please have a chat to me after the service. I’d love to speak with you and perhaps read the Bible with you so that you can know him more.

Does God call us to business as usual? I don’t think so. So let’s listen to the words of the undignified prophets, let’s heed the warnings of the scolding prophets and let’s catch God’s prophetic vision for our community and step boldly into God’s future for St John’s. Amen.