

ORDINARY SUNDAY 4: JANUARY 31st

Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19; Luke 4:21-30

Notes:

- This text is the prologue to the prophetic work and in it we find the classical statement of the divine commissioning of Jeremiah.
- It specifically establishes Jeremiah as a prophet and given that he would have to go into battle against court prophets and false prophets, it is important for the book that his credentials are established early.
- What Jeremiah says is what God is saying.
- Significantly he is appointed to be the prophet to “the nations”. His mandate applies not just to Judah but also to other nations, even to those who are ruling over God’s people as foreign powers.
- It is important to read the whole of Chapter 1 to gain some background to the ministry he is to perform in God’s name.
- In verses we see that the prophet has been directed to speaking against his own people – to the ruling classes of Judah. In doing this the prophet is shown as one who stands against the people and acknowledges that faithfulness to his ministry will bring with it persecution, misunderstanding and pain.
- There is a clear link between the promise of verse 8 and the warning that is found in verse 19.

This prologue to the book of Jeremiah is important in the light of what we read of him doing and saying later in his writings. The nation is struggling with external as well as internal problems and tensions and there are as many suggestions as to the way forward as there are groups of people who are sitting around discussing them. Each of these groups seems to be led by a few “prophets” who claim that their way is THE way forward, the way God wants the people to go. Some of those groups have the ear of the king and the power brokers in the Temple and so they have a great deal of influence. It is against these people that Jeremiah will have to carry out his ministry. As well as these internal political machinations, there is the ever oppressive presence of the invading Babylonian armies. They are a nation in deep trouble and it is to this group of people that the prophet Jeremiah is sent.

Significantly his credentials are clearly set out. He is a man who has been chosen, called and sent. His ministry is not something that comes from the people, from himself or from any political faction. He is from God. Those three lines say it all so well:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you.
Before you came to birth I consecrated you;
I have appointed you as prophet to the nations.

In other words, Jeremiah is God’s prophet and not the people’s prophet. Popularity, support and the other human measures of success have nothing to do with what Jeremiah is undertaking. He is to be about God’s work and in this prologue it is made clear that doing God’s work will inevitably bring him into conflict with rulers, leaders and those with varying agendas. Be he is to take no notice of that, keeping his mind and heart clearly focussed on what it is God is wanting to do with and for his people.

What is a surprise is to see that Jeremiah's ministry is to be as a "prophet to the nations". This too is important in the context of the history of the times. It is apparent that the Babylonians will soon invade the land and Jerusalem is unlikely to be able to resist those terrible armies. It is to these followers of foreign gods that Jeremiah is to proclaim his message. To the casual observer it may seem as though the pagan gods were winning and were more powerful than the God of Israel. But the plan of God is far greater than any human imagining. God knows where the true source of power lies and it is not in Babylon. Jeremiah is to take the divine promises right to the forces of darkness, proclaiming that Israel's God is God of history and that nations come and go according to his blessing. The people of God may appear to have been diminished and seem to be powerless but the true source of their power is not to be found within themselves. They are as powerful as their God and their willingness to be bound to him in the covenant. It is because of God that they have hope and the promise of a future in the land.

There is also an important note of caution in this vocation. Verses 17-19 spell out the consequences of taking up this vocation from God. The prophet will be persecuted. That is for certain. This persecution is not going to come from the Babylonians but from fellow Hebrews. That is the shock here. The more faithful he is to his calling from God the more likely it is that he will be attacked. Why is that? Because he is threatening the comfort of the rulers and leaders of the nations, challenging their status and demanding of them exactly the same things that he is demanding of the rest of the nation: repentance, humble service and a style of life that reflects the presence of God in the community. They will persecute him, not because his message is wrong but because they have too much to lose if Jeremiah's words were to be followed. They were not going to allow some young man to tell them what to do! No way. And so they will persecute him, put every obstacle in his way and mock and threaten him at every step of his journey.

But, as we see, God tells Jeremiah not to fear. He will be like a fortified city, a wall of bronze. He will be attacked but the arrows will never be fatal. He will be besieged but he will never be overthrown. They will fight against him but in the end he will be victorious and they will be cast out and dragged away. Why is this? Not because of any special skills and gifts that he has but because God is with him. Providing he lives his life under the protecting hand of God all of these indignities and assaults will prove to be powerless because he is doing God's work, because he is a conduit for the activity of God in the world and not acting on his own.

How important is this reading for our Church today and for our own ministries! We live and are called to live out our discipleship in difficult times. It is all too easy to look at our world and to think that the problems facing us are far too big for us to manage, that the Church is unable to break free of this downward decline. We see troublemakers and self serving people at all levels of the Church and we can wonder why we want to spend so much time fighting each other instead of coming together in Jesus Christ and concentrating on the work of preaching the Gospel. The way forward is clear for today just as it was for the people of Jeremiah's time. Get back into living as God wants, doing God's work, living godly lives. Using language that Jesus will repeat later on in the gospels, Jeremiah calls the people of his time to

repent, to turn away from their old ways and to be open to new movements of the Spirit of God. It is no different for us today.

Notes for Luke 4:21-31

- This reading continues on and concludes the reading we had last week.
- In the synagogue the person would read through the selected text, close the scroll and then give an interpretation. This is what Jesus is doing here.
- Luke sees much of the prophecies found in the Old Testament being fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus.
- In the quotation from Isaiah Luke leaves out the closing verse of that section: ...to proclaim...*a day of vengeance for our God*. This indicates that in Jesus there is going to be a different understanding of the way God acts towards sinners, that the messiah Jesus is bringing judgment but in a different way to that expected by traditional Judaism.
- The crowd see Jesus without the eyes of faith. To them he is the son of Joseph and Mary and not the messiah.
- Jesus uses the examples of two persecuted prophets – Elijah and Elisha. These two were venerated as great prophets, yet in their own day they were hounded, persecuted and misunderstood. As will Jesus be treated.

From the very outset of Luke's account of the Gospel, we see Jesus in trouble because of what he is saying and doing. They have no problem while he is bringing comforting news, a message that meets their expectations but does not force them to move into new areas of possibility under God. The problem in this story is that Jesus is making it clear that he is going to suffer the same persecution, this time from his own kinsmen, that the prophets had to endure. He is saying that they people of Nazareth are as blind and as petty as were the people of the time of Elijah and Elisha and that they had to change their ways if they were going to be open to the Good News of the Kingdom that has come.

That is the hub of the problem. Luke is reminding his readers that from the outset Jesus' ministry was about transformation. It was not a ministry that was aimed at propping up the religion of the time. He came to call people to repent, to turn back to God and to live lives that reflected the covenant relationship God wanted. He was about calling people to a way of life and the more successful he was at that, the more irritated and anxious people were going to become. Change is always difficult and moving forward in hope in new directions always problematic. But from the outset Jesus is inviting them to walk with him. It was the power of God at work in Jesus that would make the transformation successful. It was in placing their trust in their belief that God was at work in all generations and that the creator of the universe could transform the world of their day.

But that kind of message was difficult for the people of the time of Elijah and Elisha, it was clearly difficult for the people of the time of Jesus and it is no less difficult for the people of our own time. Why is that? From Luke's perspective it is a question of faith. It requires belief that God is at work in creation, transforming it and creating it anew. Hope is built on an understanding that what is required of us is a collaboration in the work that God is now doing, in divine activity that is already to be found among us. It also requires that we step beyond our own demands, our own expectations and our own preferences and tune ourselves in again and again into the call and direction of God. In the end of the Gospel we will see what this requires: a

death. We are going to be led over and over to that hill on the outskirts of Jerusalem and told that we too have to join Jesus on the cross. We too have to die to ourselves in order to rise again and live to God. There can be no new life without a death, no glory without a dying and no Easter without the grave. All tough messages that can force us to remain where we are, as we are but they are also messages of hope and reassurance because they affirm that God is with us.

Conclusion:

These are very helpful and encouraging readings as we move into our new year under God. They remind us that we, like Jeremiah are people who are called and sent by God. He knows our weaknesses and limitations and yet still calls us and still sends us. He does this because for God, the success of our ministry comes out of his actions and not out of our own strengths. God is at work in us and it is this divine presence that guarantees that what we do in his name and in his power will be successful.

They are also good because they warn us in advance that there will always be opposition to new directions of the Spirit. Sometimes those oppositions are to be found within ourselves. We might find change and renewal difficult and threatening. That is not a problem. It only becomes a problem of faith when we decide that staying where we are is preferable to moving in a new direction. As the world around us changes so too does our own need to change the way we address the Gospel message to that world. That is our task. We are called and chosen to bring God alive to the people of the world in which we find ourselves living and to do that we need to rely on God and less and less on ourselves.

So we move forward filled with hope and confidence, sure that as long as we work together as the people of God, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, the Lord God will achieve in us and through us whatsoever he wishes. Which is why the Gospel is called Good News.