

This is the third and last of our three-part series on the life and spirituality of the prophet Jeremiah, using the book "Run with the Horses" by Eugene Petersen.

Last week, we learned about Jeremiah's prayer life. Jeremiah has an intense, undivided preoccupation with God that accounts for his personal intensity and an incorruptible integrity that is so powerful and attractive. His prayer time is not peaceful, accepting and soothing. He pours out to God his pain, anger and loneliness. Having spoken honestly and passionately to God, Jeremiah then listens while God speaks of repentance, priorities and renewal.

We heard how Eugene Petersen sees prayer as an intimate dinner with God, a special space in which the rest of the world is set aside, and God is focussed on. Too often, he says, we treat prayer as if God is the waiter at the dinner, being given requests, and the person we focus on at the dinner is ourselves. Finally, and most importantly, we heard how one needs to be disciplined and dedicated, putting aside time to pray in order to have a strong spiritual life and a close, loving relationship with God.

Jeremiah needs that close relationship with God. He needs the strength that prayer gives him. Jeremiah's calling is demanding and emotionally and spiritually exhausting. Painful. Depleting. And yet, he continues. God gives him strength to persist. God also challenges him. We have heard that when Jeremiah, in despair, feels that he is wearied with his life, with his work, God challenges him: if running with men has wearied you, how will you race against horses? Jeremiah wants to give in, and yet he does not. He chooses to find his strength in God. He chooses to run with horses. He does not give in. He is persistent.

In Jeremiah 25, in the centre of the book, Jeremiah uses a word, *hashkem*, which means "persistently". It is a pivot, a key word in Jeremiah's life - and his book. Jeremiah tells the people of Jerusalem "For twenty-three years... the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened." For twenty-three years, Jeremiah listened to God, and spoke God's word of love and guidance to God's people, and he was not heard. Jeremiah was mocked, rejected, imprisoned and yet he persisted. How did Jeremiah learn his persistence? He didn't learn it from the people around him. He learned it from God.

In the five prayer-poems in Lamentations, written in the tradition of Jeremiah during the darkest and most devastating time in the history of God's people, during and after the fall of Jerusalem, one finds this verse - one of my favourite verses - "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness". (Lamentations 3:22-23).

God's love never ends. His renewal and strength never ends. God doesn't give up on us. God is persistent.

A few years ago, I led a quiet day for the Grahamstown Anglican churches at the monastery outside town. The focus for the day was on suffering. I spoke of the ways in which we choose to respond to suffering in our lives.

After the talk, the participants were invited to find a space in the lovely gardens outside and to spend some time in prayer and contemplation about times of difficulty and suffering in their lives. When we met again later in the afternoon for tea, I found that one of the participants was missing. Concerned, I made discreet enquiries about her. I had worried that she had found the subject matter difficult. On the contrary, I was told that as she had never experienced suffering in her life, this lady had felt she couldn't do the exercise, so she took herself off to have a nice nap.

Well, very few of us are as fortunate as that woman. There are few of us who have not suffered grief and loss of some kind, we have had dark times of deep loneliness, times of heartbreak, times when we think we can't possibly go on. When we want to give in, when we cry out to God.

Jeremiah felt like that. Jeremiah depended for his very life on the close relationship he had with God. He needed the strength that prayer gave him. And with that strength, he strengthened others, who really needed encouragement. He wrote to the Israelites, who needed to hear from him because they were living in exile.

Being exiled, being wrenched from the places and the people you know, is an immensely destructive, traumatic experience. Imagine you were one of the people forcibly relocated by the government, woken in the night by armed policemen and told to load your possessions on a truck, before being taken far away to live in another place, separated from your friends, family and your community, where you had to begin again. We hear stories in our own country, in our own city every day from refugees who fled for their lives with only the clothes on their backs, and who are struggling to make a new life here, amidst hostility.

Exile is a violent and destructive force. Our sense of who we are: our sense of worth comes from our community, our work, and our home. And when the first shock, the wave of emotion has passed - when we have been separated from all that is meaningful to us, all that we belong to, we end up feeling worthless, meaningless and discarded.

The leading people of Jerusalem were removed from the conquered city and taken into exile in 587 BC, a political tactic by the Babylonians. They were forced to travel 350 kilometres across the Middle Eastern desert, leaving home, temple and hills. In the new land, Babylon, the customs were strange, the language was incomprehensible and the landscape flat and featureless. The faces were strange, even the weather was different.

In our lives we can experience exile in less extreme ways, ways that alienate us from what is familiar, what is safe and known. We may, as I did at the end of last year, move towns where we must find new friends, or we start a new job, or begin at a new school. Or we lose someone close to us, our bodies change as we grow older, we lose our independence. We feel alienated by the rapid economic, social and political changes in our society, both global and national. And while we are dislocated from

what we know, when we are strangers in a strange land, we have little to turn to but to God. Perhaps we remember fondly how things were. And God calls us to turn from those dreams to Him – to the future he has for us. To hope.

You know that moment when you've just slammed your hand in the car door? What happens? The world gets much smaller. In fact, you couldn't care about anything else right then – just the pain, just yourself, for that time. And then it gets a bit better, and you can carry on. That is a response to physical suffering. You turn in towards yourself. You isolate others.

The same happens when you suffer emotionally. It is important to process the emotions and the pain thoroughly first, but problems arise when the time comes for us to move on, and some people get stuck in that place. When we have been in times of trouble and suffering, it is so tempting to turn inward, to turn to self-pity, to complain and be bitter. One just has to read the psalms to get the picture: “a terrible thing has happened to us, they say, it's not fair. Why are we here while our friends are in Jerusalem? How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?”

The Bible tells us of three Israelite religious leaders who encouraged this kind of complaining. They encouraged discontent and nostalgia. The people longed for what they had had, and refused to live in the present. They were casual and irresponsible in their relationships in exile. They didn't bother to plant or harvest; they didn't bother to learn how to run a business. After all, who knew how long they would be there? They weren't interested in making an effort, and gladly sank into self-pity and a found a good religious excuse to be lazy parasites on society.

And then – two emissaries arrived from Jerusalem, where Jeremiah had been left behind. They brought from Jeremiah, to use my husband Colin's expression, A Strongly Worded Letter. God tells you, said Jeremiah's letter, to build houses, and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce, take wives and have sons and daughters. This is not your favourite place, says God. But learn to live in it. Make the best you can of it. Make an effort: earn a living. Interact with the people you live with and marry with them. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in **its** welfare you will find your welfare. That word Jeremiah uses for welfare is Shalom. A peace and rightness in all things.

Jeremiah challenges us. When we are with people we don't want to be with or in a situation we don't like, do we tend to feel sorry for ourselves and focus on what is wrong with the world, or do we try to make the best out of difficult circumstances? To focus on the positives? We are not called to blind optimism. We are called to acknowledge our difficulties to God and continue nonetheless, looking to God for guidance on how to act in the situation, to let God show us who we are meant to be.

We need to acknowledge that what is more important than grief, than loss, than global economics, than politics, than crime, than all the complicated difficulties and often the sordidness and fallen-ness of this world, is God, who is God of all of this. The God who created this world, these people. It is just as possible to live out the will of God in this place as well as anywhere else. What would have happened if Mother Theresa had submitted to the will of her Mother Superior when she was young and given up

on her vision to care for the poorest of the poor? If Ghandi had given up in the face of the might of the British Empire? If Natalie du Toit had remained immobile, paralysed with self-pity? If she had given up on her swimming career after that gruesome accident?

God makes us a promise. “I know the plans I have for you; says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the Lord.”

Some of the Israelites in exile rejected the message out of hand. Most, however, accepted the message and embarked on the search to become what it meant to be God’s people in Babylon. Eugene Petersen tells us that “The result was that this became the most creative period in the entire sweep of Hebrew history. They did not lose their identity, they discovered it. They learned how to pray in deeper and more life-changing ways. They lost everything that they thought was important and found what was important: they found God.”

Jeremiah preached hope, and he lived in hope. Hope acts on the conviction that God will complete the work that he has begun, even when the appearances are against it. Like those people in exile in Babylon, we are called to hear the voice of God in the midst of difficult circumstances, and live as his people of hope. Amen