

The pace of the lives we lead is hectic. On Monday morning the week starts again. It is: get the kids out of bed and to school, rush to work, read the emails, finish the report due for the meeting on Tuesday.

Attend meetings, pay bills at lunchtime, attend more meetings, fetch the kids, throw something together for supper, perhaps attend more meetings or help the children with their homework and collapse into bed exhausted at the end of the day.

And if that is not what your day sounds like, then it is probably equally hectic with freelance work, service clubs, volunteering at NGOs or attending club meetings.

The pace of our lives today can be frenetic, and sometimes we only realise that when we are temporarily incapacitated by illness. When we go on holiday, we are so stressed that it can take the whole first week for us to wind down. Time is our most precious commodity.

This Sunday, we begin a three -part sermon series to explore what the life and spirituality of Jeremiah has to teach us about living full and extraordinary lives of excellence in the midst of a world of tiring, frantic activity that so often leaves us unfulfilled. They will be based on the book “Run with the Horses” by Eugene Petersen, the man who wrote “The Message”.

Eugene Petersen’s fascination with Jeremiah is contagious. In the world we live of shallow TV soap opera heroes, when the newspaper is full of what David Beckham is doing to his marriage, or to his hair, (or both), the latest dysfunctionality of Amy Winehouse and what Britney Spears is up to now... Jeremiah is real. He’s vivid. Solid. Driven. Passionate.

Imagine it: a worldwide expert on, say, productivity, maybe Stephen Covey, for example, comes to South Africa to hold a seminar. The event has been advertised for quite some time in all the business papers and on the radio. He has also announced that he will set up and train a team of people to run the programme after his departure. How people covet a position on the team. How people jockey for position, how they submit impressive CVs and try to influence the right people.

And then the expert comes out to South Africa, and he does quite a bit of travelling, and every now and again, he chooses a person to join the team. The problem is, they aren’t top-flight business experts or human resource people. There isn’t a management expert amongst them. There’s a University of the Free State student, a small-time loan shark who also works in pension distribution for the Social Welfare Department, a café owner and even a drug dealer. Shocking? How much more shocking is it that these are the kinds of people God uses throughout the history of humanity’s relationship with Him.

Eugene Petersen suggests that throughout the Bible, we struggle to find what he calls impeccably virtuous models – Abraham lied, Jacob cheated, Moses murdered and complained, Gideon whined, David committed adultery, Matthew was a tax collector,

Peter was an impetuous and cowardly man. The people God used and still uses are fashioned from the same clay as you and me. They are not the kind of people we could hero worship. They are plain and ordinary, flawed just like you and me, living in ordinary settings just like you and me. They are unique like you and me.

We love knowing the background to people's lives. Their childhoods. The experiences that shaped them. But the Bible gives us almost no personal details about the people called to serve God. The focus of the Bible is rather on God, and what God does through them. These people live lives of faith, lives of intensity and thoroughness. They do not live lives of shallow emptiness, and nor should we.

Life so often seems to reduce us to numbers. ID numbers, passport numbers, contract numbers, bank account numbers, a number in a queue. Just like ants in an anthill, scurrying around busy with trivia, consuming goods in a consumer society. But we are called to live differently, to live fully, as well-developed, mature, faith-filled good people. We shouldn't settle for the mundane, the ordinary. We should reach for the best that God intended us to be – to be extraordinary, to live lives of excellence.

If we don't know all the details of Jeremiah's life, God knew every detail of Jeremiah's life from before Jeremiah himself was conscious of being Jeremiah. God tells him: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer1:5). We may search to know God, we may be curious. We may ask questions and read books and go to church to find out more.

But in fact long before WE began asking questions about God, God subjected US to the most intensive and searching questions. Before we thought to ask about God, God had singled us out as important, as having a purpose. Our lives are not for us to puzzle through, to search for meaning. For meaning, we should turn to God, who knew us before we knew ourselves, in order to understand the truth of our lives, to understand ourselves.

God knew Jeremiah and consecrated Jeremiah before he was born. Consecrated means "set apart for God's side". There is no cosmic element of chance here. We are not just numbers in a system. You and I are not cogs in some machine. We are chosen specifically for something important that God is doing in his continuous and energetic battle against evil, sin, death, hate and despair. Jeremiah was created for a task and given away by God to the nations.

God called Jeremiah to be a prophet: to speak God's truth, an unpopular truth, a truth that would have frightening consequences once it was spoken to God's people. God knew what Jeremiah will be feeling: he told him not to be terrified, and that people would fight against Jeremiah but that he would not be overcome.

If we look at ourselves, says **Eugene Peterson: P 55.**

Prophets know two things as much as they know they live and breathe. The first thing they know is that God is personal and alive and active. The second is that what is going on right now, in this world, at this time in history, is critical. A prophet is obsessed with God, and a prophet is immersed in the now.

The work of the prophet is to call people to live well, to live rightly. But the prophet must do more than just speak out – the prophet must also live out the message. The life and the message of the prophet challenge us to live up to our creation by God, to live into our salvation – to become all we are meant to be. We cannot be human if we are not in relationship with God. Our relationship with God is what we are created for. It is the essential, the central core of our being.

What did Jeremiah do? Well, God asked him to do something he believed he couldn't do – so, naturally, he refused. He was not qualified. He hadn't gone through SETA-approved, outcomes based courses on being a prophet. He felt overwhelmed. He was afraid. He told God "Ah, God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." Don't we do that? Don't we offer God excuses and plead our inadequacies in order to avoid living the best, the life God calls us into? I'm only a youth. I'm only a parent, I'm just a lay person, I'm not ordained, I don't have enough training, I don't have time. We feel we can't cope with what God asks. We cannot manage.

**As Eugene Petersen puts it: p. 49.**

If we are brutally honest with ourselves, we end up feeling inadequate, afraid. There is a huge gap between what we think we can do and what God calls us to do. In the same way that God calls Jeremiah to be a prophet, God call us to be a person. Our excuses to that calling are disallowed by the Lord, who says to us as he says to Jeremiah: "Do not say 'I am only a youth', for to all whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord. The Lord then put forth his hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth, saying, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant". God gave Jeremiah two visions that empowered him to carry out the challenging task ahead.

It must never be our feelings that decide our level of participation in life and our response to God's calling for us to live life fully as Christians. It is what God decides about us. He chooses us in order to equip us for what he wants us to be and do. God tells us: "I called you to a life of purpose far beyond what you think yourself capable of living and promised you adequate strength to fulfil your destiny".

Jeremiah's life challenges us as God challenged him. Life was tough. The city was besieged by invaders, and Jeremiah was persecuted by the authorities for his audacity in speaking God's truth into the situation. In a memorable passage, when Jeremiah was feeling sorry for himself and was worn down, he was about to give in and abandon his calling. God asked him: "If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?"

God is asking us: are we wearied? Do we give in? Do we submit to a kind of emotional and spiritual death, after which we carry on living for years as a kind of half-life? Or do we answer God's call to live at our best, to pursue righteousness? Eugene Petersen says it is easier to be neurotic, parasitic and be average – easier, but not better, he says. Easier, but not more significant. Easier, but not more fulfilling.

He puts it like this: What is it you really want, Jeremiah, do you want to shuffle along with this crowd, or run with the horses? Jeremiah weighed his options. He counted the cost. He hesitated. His response was not verbal but biographical. His life became his answer; "I'll run with the horses" Amen