

Last Sunday, we began our three-part series on the life and spirituality of the prophet Jeremiah, using the book “Run with the Horses” by Eugene Petersen.

We heard how God called Jeremiah to speak the truth, an unpopular truth, to the people of the Lord and Jeremiah was terrified and refused to be a prophet. He felt overwhelmed. He told God “Ah, God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” We admitted that we do that too – we offer God excuses and plead our inadequacies in order to avoid living the best, the lives God calls us into.

We learned that 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 real person. 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”. Today, we are going to look at the spirituality of Jeremiah in contrast to that of the people around him.

It is interesting to look at the background to our reading from Jeremiah today. Ruling in the period before the time of Jeremiah's ministry, Manasseh was the worst king the Hebrews had ever had – a thoroughly bad man presiding over a totally corrupt government. This corruption poisoned the Temple of the Lord, and undermined and infiltrated the worship of God. Manasseh encouraged a pagan worship that involved sexual orgies, cult prostitutes, wizards, sorcerers, magic and superstition that defiled the great Solomonic temple in Jerusalem. This vileness nearly brought an end to the faith of the people. King Josiah, his successor, re-established the law of the Lord with the discovery of the book of Deuteronomy and began with sweeping reforms. Jeremiah was in the midst of these reforms, speaking the truth of God into the situation.

But the reforms were only skin-deep. God told his people through Jeremiah that their enthusiasm for worship and their euphoria were clichéd, shallow. The people who stood in the temple of the Lord were pleased with themselves. They worshipped God mindlessly with unchanged hearts. “Do not trust these deceptive words”, says Jeremiah, “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord”. God is saying that reform is important, but that serving God is not just a matter of worship, places, words, pews, and church buildings. They are important. But ultimately, really, they are just *stuff*. There are more important things.

What are those important things? God wants from us life and love, mercy, obedience and passion of faith. These people in the temple were doing what they wanted every other day of the week – exploiting the weak, taking advantage of people, putting worldly priorities before God and then coming to the pleasant temple on Sunday to feel good about themselves. Did that make them righteous in God's eyes? What a challenge this is to our own lives! Eugene Peterson warns us that a church is never in so much danger as when it believes it is doing well and is satisfied with itself.

Theologian Ronald Rolheiser, in his book “The Shattered Lantern – rediscovering a felt presence of God”, says that most often, God is not experienced as a living person to whom we actually talk, person to person, and to whom we relate friend to friend, lover to lover, child to parent. He suggests that God is rather experienced by us and related to as a religion, a church, a moral philosophy, and a guide for private virtue.

God and religion are so often given the same type of status and importance as is given the royal family in England, namely, they are the symbolic anchor for a certain way of life, but they are hardly important in its day-to-day functioning. One does not see much evidence, he says, that anyone is actually all that interested in God.

God sent Jeremiah down to the Potter’s house, an everyday place one could find in any community, but also a place where each pot or bowl made was a work of art designed for a purpose. There Jeremiah saw the potter working at the wheel. As the formless lump of clay took shape in the potter’s hands, Jeremiah saw God at work making a people for his glory. A people that were necessary, that had a purpose, but were also unique and beautiful. And as Jeremiah watched, the vessel being created was spoiled in the hands of the potter. Jeremiah knew about spoiled vessels – people whose sin, rebellion and self-will had resulted in their not hearing the voice of the Lord, whose disobedience had turned them from the purpose intended for them from God.

What did the Potter do? Did he destroy the clay or throw it away? No, he patiently reformed the misshapen vessel, kneaded and pressed, began the creative process again. God told Israel through Jeremiah: “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. “If that nation turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it.”

Jeremiah’s message is powerful and challenging. Are we spoiled vessels that God is longing to fill? Are we unfit for the purposes of God through our own disobedience? Do we stand in church Sunday by Sunday mouthing shallow words that don’t reach our hearts? How do we live out our faith?

What about Jeremiah himself? What can we learn from him? We know that Jeremiah lived out his faith with perseverance, strength and tenacity. What was he like in his private life, away from the public eye? What sustained him? What do we know about his relationship with God? We find an answer in the seven confessional passages in Jeremiah. We call them “confessional” because they are the most personal, the passages where Jeremiah opens his heart, where we learn about Jeremiah’s inner life.

What we see is not Jeremiah the scholar, studying old scrolls about Babylonia or Egypt to do a comparative study of ancient religions, or in casual academic, intellectual debate with others about the nature of God or catching up on the latest rumours about God, nor does he use his skills and intelligence to work out the real questions of the troubling meaning of God in that difficult time of enemy invasions. No. Where do we find Jeremiah? Jeremiah is found praying – talking to God and listening to God. Praying.

Prayer is the conscious decision to approach God as the personal centre of our lives. It is language at its most intimate, at its most personal. It establishes our priorities.

Quote from Eugene Petersen – p101 – dinner. Prayer is the time for this deepest and most personal conversation with God, where the rest of the world fades away. Sometimes this is a time of quiet, when there are no words necessary, just loving presence and your heartfelt attention. But prayer needs the desire to put everything else aside and put time aside for building your relationship with God.

Imagine a slightly different situation, a variation of the example of the dinner we have just heard: Quote from Eugene Petersen – p102 – dinner 2.

Jeremiah's conversations with God are the real thing. He had an intense, undivided preoccupation with God that accounts for his personal intensity and incorruptible integrity. And the Jeremiah we get to know is not pretty, shallow or correct in what he says to God. His prayer time is not peaceful, accepting and soothing. Jeremiah is lonely, hurt and angry. He prays for God to stay with him and to take vengeance for him on his persecutors. He tells God in anger that he is suffering ridicule, beatings, imprisonment and threats against his life because of God. He is frustrated with the deliberate patience of God while it seems his enemies will destroy him.

We often feel that way, don't we? When we need things to happen quickly, we tell God exactly what he must do for us and when. Jeremiah poured out to God the loneliness that came from being set apart from the others as he found the meaning of God's word and preached its lived truth. He prayed his hurt – "why is my pain unceasing/my wound incurable/ refusing to be healed?" The sin, the cruelty of the people was a deep wound to Jeremiah. He hurt because he cared, he felt the eternal love of God for these people, and felt all their rejection. He turned in anger to God, feeling deceived and feeling used; telling God literally that God had seduced him and forced him to submit to his plans. Jeremiah at prayer is an angry, scared, lonely man who is hurting.

Having spoken honestly and passionately to God, Jeremiah listened expectantly. God spoke to Jeremiah of repentance, priorities and renewal. First, God called Jeremiah to repentance. I understand, said God, you are lonely, angry, scared and hurting. But I won't indulge you in that. Turn away from that, and I will restore you to serving me. God called Jeremiah to re-establish his priorities: If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless/you shall be as my mouth/they shall turn to you/but you shall not turn to them.

Jeremiah's priorities were re-established in prayer. Eugene Peterson tells us: "The setting of priorities is not a once-off act. It has to be done frequently. Balances shift. Circumstances change. Moods swing." **We have to ask ourselves: is it still God with whom I have my most important relationship? Is God my priority?** The world changes rapidly, it is dynamic and challenging, and constantly wears away at the bonds that connect us to God's purposes. In prayer, God provides renewal, where God confirms anew the faith to which we are committed. It's like a spiritual download of software updates, or a battery recharge.

In the same way as one prepares for an endurance race like the Comrades Marathon through discipline and committed preparation, no one becomes fully human the way Jeremiah was human without discipline, by mere posturing and empty words. There is no way you can cheat the process, no easy short-cut.

It was Jeremiah's prayer, passionate, hidden and persistent, that brought him to his full humanity and his deep spirituality in the midst of oppression and persecution. What he did in secret determined who he was in public. What we do in our prayer lives determines the kind of people of God we become in public – and Jeremiah challenges us: are we authentic? Are we as fully human as we can be? Is our prayer life the source of who we are as children of God?

Do we have a meaningful relationship with God? As friend to friend, as lover to lover? Perhaps we aren't in that place with God right now. Perhaps life has been hard, and we are angry with God and prayer is difficult. Perhaps that first feeling of love and closeness with God has passed, and we long for the way we used to feel in our relationship with God? Maybe the words on our lips are not from our hearts. There are so many things that could come between us and God. The busyness of life, different priorities, maybe we have sinned and we long for restitution. We long for deep and meaningful conversation with God.

Open your hearts to God – go beyond the repeated, empty words. Get real. Submit yourself like that clay in the potter's hands to be re-made, to be re-created. This is your chance now, in this time of silence.