

The “Confessions” of Jeremiah

Sermon preached by Anthony Freeman at Holy Cross, Crediton, 28th August 2011

It is two months since I stood in this pulpit, but Jeremiah, who taxed us all on that occasion, has not gone away. So once again we are taken back to nearly 600 years BC, when the new super-power Babylon was about to destroy Jerusalem and take its citizens into exile. But this week’s Old Testament passage (Jeremiah 15.15-21) is very different from last time’s.

For years now, God had been telling Jeremiah to warn the people and their leaders of this coming disaster, and to tell them that it would all be their own fault. And the prophet had done as he was told: “Thus says the Lord, you have disobeyed my laws, you have afflicted the poor, you have sworn falsely, you have worshipped other gods, and now the Lord has rejected you...” But nothing happened. The people went on sinning; and Jeremiah went on denouncing them; and still nothing happened.

Well, one thing happened: Jeremiah became a laughing-stock; and worse than that he was attacked and persecuted for being disloyal to his nation and its king, and for speaking falsely “in the name of the Lord”. Yet still God went on telling Jeremiah to preach the coming disaster in his name; and still nothing happened. Life in Judah went on as normal — for all except Jeremiah, who continued to be mocked and persecuted.

Then, in his frustration and his despair, Jeremiah did two remarkable things. First, he turned and yelled back at the Lord — whose devoted and loyal spokesman he had been for all these years — and bitterly accused God personally of being false and deceitful and deliberately humiliating his prophet. And then, even more remarkably, Jeremiah had it all written down, along with what he took to be God’s answers to his own ranting prayers.

It is hard for us — in these days of reality TV and frank autobiographies — to get a sense of how shocking this public baring of Jeremiah’s tortured soul would have been. There was nothing remotely like it in world literature up to that date, and it would be another thousand years before anything else comparable was published: that was to be the *Confessions* of St Augustine, in the fifth century AD.

These highly intimate and argumentative prayers of Jeremiah are found scattered through the middle ten chapters of his book. There are five of them, and modern scholars have named these passages “the confessions of Jeremiah” after their similarity to Augustine’s writing of the same name. Today’s Old Testament lesson was part of the second of these “confessions”, presumably chosen to accompany our gospel reading in which Jesus foretold both his own sufferings and those of his followers.

Jeremiah starts with a plea that God will avenge him against his persecutors. This may seem to us a long way from Jesus’s injunction to “bless our enemies and pray for those that persecute us”, but the key thing to notice is where the emphasis lies. It is not so much on the idea of vengeance itself, as on the Lord as the one who should do the avenging, and why. First, because with his God’s-eye view he knows the whole situation (“O Lord, you know,” were the very first words Jeremiah spoke) and therefore can act justly. Secondly, because, as Jeremiah is quick to point out, “on your account I suffer insult”: if it is God’s fault that Jeremiah has been persecuted, then it is only right that God should settle the score. And thirdly, Jeremiah will have known that in the Law of Moses, God himself had said, “Vengeance is mine ... the Lord will vindicate his people” (Deut. 32.35 — a verse quoted by St Paul in today’s epistle at Romans 12.19).

The next sentence in our Old Testament lesson completely changes the tone: “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy”. This translation follows the Hebrew text of Jeremiah, but the change of mood is so abrupt that some scholars think it must be a mistake. They prefer to follow the old Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures, which in a number of places seems to preserve a more accurate wording than the existing copies of the Hebrew Old Testament. So instead of “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy” (which are almost a quotation from a verse in another prophet, Ezekiel), Jeremiah perhaps wrote this: “I have suffered reproach from them that despise thy words. Consume them and let thy word be to me a joy”.

Whichever of those versions is correct, there is no doubt that immediately after this, Jeremiah is back in plaintive mood. Under the burden of his call to be a prophet, he is isolated and shunned, and with nothing to give him pleasure he feels as if he has an incurable wound. It is at this point that something snaps, and he goes on the attack, accusing God of being like a deceitful *wadi* in the desert — a narrow valley that ought to be a water-course but which fails in the drought when it is needed most.

Then at last, halfway through our reading, Jeremiah runs out of steam. Exhausted, he finally falls silent; and the silence offers a space in which God’s answer can be discerned: “Therefore, thus says the Lord...”. But this time it is not yet another diatribe for the prophet to convey to the people and their leaders. This time the word is for him, and him alone (although, as I have said, at some point Jeremiah bravely chose to make the whole affair public). And it is a word of reconciliation: “If you will turn back, I will take you back”, says the Lord.

Up to this point, Jeremiah has been so full of self-righteous indignation that he has been all talk and no listening. Now, in words that he ascribes to the Lord, but which we can imagine came into his head as much from his own embittered mind as from outside himself, he comes to see that he might — at least partly — be to blame for his plight. Perhaps he has not been quite as true to his vocation as he always insisted; perhaps the word of Jeremiah had more than once contaminated the pure Word of the Lord. How else are to explain the words he now hears: “If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth”.

This is what he hears the Lord saying to him. And there is more: if Jeremiah will in future be faithful to God’s word, then the Lord will make him like a “wall of bronze” that shall never be overcome, and the Lord will deliver him “out of the hand of the wicked”. So, for a time at least, Jeremiah achieves some peace of mind. But what lesson, if any, does his turmoil have for us? I think it is twofold.

First, however deep or shallow our faith, if we feel that God has betrayed us and let us down or left us in the lurch, we should take him on and say so. From Jacob wrestling with the Angel of the Lord in *Genesis*, to Jesus accusing God of forsaking him in the *Gospel of Mark*, the Bible’s heavyweights have never taken their troubles lying down: they have fought back, even against God himself, just like Jeremiah. And then — and this is the second lesson for us — having refused to let God trample over them, these spiritual giants were finally vindicated: Jacob was blessed by God with the new name Israel; Jesus was raised up on the third day; and Jeremiah heard the Lord’s promise: “If you will turn back, I will take you back”; so shall it be for us, if we are prepared both to shout and also to listen.