

What's it worth ? Minster Evensong 21/6/15

Jer 10¹⁻¹⁶, Rom 11^{25-end}

O Lord, open our hearts to your word, for the sake of your Living Word, Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Amen

“ Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field.....But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King “ (Jeremiah chapter 10, verses 5 and 10)

What's it worth ? What's he or she worth ? What am I worth ? TV adverts encourage me to lavish my pension on extravagant beauty products which make equally extravagant claims about what they can do for me and my wrinkles- “ Because you're worth it !” Is that how I am to be valued ? What is value ? Businesses strive to 'add value' to their products and services. Meanwhile, the taxman lies in wait to collect the “value added tax “ !

It's tempting for us supposedly ever so sophisticated and civilized 21st century Christians to undervalue the Old Testament. What have we to learn from those apparently unsophisticated tribes people who lived in an obscure corner of the Middle East thousands of years ago ? Well, on two occasions recently, as I watched TV, that ever-present, highly valued feature of **our** civilization, I thought of the prophet Jeremiah. First, I watched a news reporter standing beside a deckchair which had been salvaged from the wreck of the Titanic. It was too fragile for him to sit on, and yet it was subsequently auctioned for a huge sum of money. Then there was the Antiques Roadshow broadcast which featured a collection of early railway advertising posters. They were valued at £30,000 ! Who says there is no idolatry in our day and age? It is as prevalent here and now as it ever was. Jeremiah and his fellow prophets, like Amos and Isaiah would have mocked our society for having such ridiculous priorities, and they would have wept to think how that money could have been so very much better spent to help those in desperate need. They would have urged us to turn back to God, who loves the poor, before we were overtaken by judgement and disaster.

Jeremiah was a protester. I think he might well have been eager to participate in many of our modern protest movements against the false values of today's world. He was also a demonstrator- he used symbolic actions to drive home his message. He once appeared in public wearing a wooden yoke to symbolise the impending downfall of Judah, as subjugation to the Babylonian empire became increasingly inevitable. Another time God told him to go and smash an earthenware jug at the city gate in front of the elders and senior priests and tell them that the Almighty had said: “ I will break this people and this city as one breaks a potters vessel, so that it can never be mended “

Protesters and demonstrators are unpopular. They attract fierce criticism and get themselves a bad name. People resent being disturbed by them and try to write them off by caricaturing them and their message. Jeremiah's name has passed into the language to describe a habitual pessimist. He has been written off as an incurable misery-guts who resembles John Laurie's character, Private Frazer, in Dad's Army, wearing a manic expression and declaring “We're doomed, we're all doomed ! “ This is unfair and inaccurate. Jeremiah's message is ultimately one of hope. It is that, however much we fail and thereby bring disgrace and disaster upon ourselves, God remains faithful and

however dire our circumstances may have become, if and when we turn to him again wholeheartedly, he will rescue and redeem us.

Jeremiah was a shy, quiet sensitive young man, from a priestly family. He was perhaps no more than 20 years old when his call came to be God's prophet. He had grown up as a country boy in the village of Anathoth just outside Jerusalem. His love of country life and the natural world is woven into his writings. There is always the promise of renewal and fresh growth in the countryside. When God points out to his new prophet a beautiful almond tree in first blossom, the heavenly voice tells him that just as when the branches of the tree had appeared to be dead, there had been new life waiting within them, so God, though he seemed to be asleep, was actually ever wakeful and would soon make his power felt. Thus hope is at the core of Jeremiah's message, hope founded securely on the knowledge that the God who had called him was utterly loving, just and trustworthy. Yet hard on the heels of the vision of the almond tree came another, deeply troubling revelation. God showed Jeremiah a cauldron, seething, bubbling and boiling fiercely, tilted on its side and about to overflow. This evoked the storms and traumas which were about to engulf the nation.

Judah was still suffering the after-effects of the rule of King Manasseh. His reign was the longest and worst in its history. Manasseh had pandered to the powerful empire of Assyria, introducing the worship of its strange gods and following their pagan practices- these included astrology, also trying to foretell the future by supposedly communing with the dead, and, worst of all, human sacrifice. His successor, King Josiah, had carried out a programme of reforms, but these were largely a matter of changes to external arrangements. What was needed was a change of heart and a true set of values for society.

Idolatry in our own day is subtle and complex. In Jeremiah's time it was blatant and obvious. He describes how a forest tree from his beloved countryside was hewn down. Skilled craftsmen carved it into the shape of a so-called god. Goldsmiths and silversmiths used costly silver and gold from far-flung places to decorate it. Finally, it was decked out with clothing beautifully fashioned from expensive blue and purple cloth such as nobles or royalty would wear. Then it was fastened securely with hammer and nails so that it couldn't move. Yet, at the end of it all, despite all that time, effort and expense, it remained what it had been to start with- a lifeless hunk of wood, that could not do anything, good or evil. It just stood there, dumbly, like a scarecrow in a cucumber field. At least scarecrows scare crows- this silly overdressed tree trunk was good for nothing! It had nothing to tell anyone, and there was absolutely no need to fear it. To worship it was just absurd and pointless.

Jeremiah had experienced the power of the one real, true God at work in the natural world that meant so much to him. In the vastness of the starry sky, in the earthquake, the mist, the wind and the lightning. This was the Lord of hosts who had formed all things and chosen Israel for his inheritance, an inheritance of which we too are part because of Jesus. There is none like him, the living God, the everlasting king.

What are our idols? The things that we give value to and expend time, money and creative energy on but which are useless or harmful to us? We give them our worship, in place of the worship that is due to God. Money, possessions, status, food, pleasure, self interest. Each one of us will have our own potential idols. Things that are good in themselves perhaps, but not when they have too great a priority in our lives. Not when they threaten to take us over. We see this in our society and in

the wider world. Football is no longer about friendly rivalry between towns, cities and nations. It is about money. And money breeds corruption, as we have seen so vividly in the FIFA scandal.

Now, on the world stage, our false values are having tragic consequences, which were totally predictable. For many decades we in the West have been consuming a hugely disproportionate percentage of the world's resources. We have dabbled in the affairs of other nations to feather our own nest. Is it any wonder then that we now face an ever-growing and increasingly unmanageable tide of migration on the part of desperate people who need or just want what we have? True, other factors are also at work in this state of affairs, but we have a share of the blame. So, what are these people worth? And in our own nation, indeed here in Beverley, huge divisions exist between the haves and the have nots, so that many people rely on food banks to survive. What are they worth?

We may not like to think of such things on our way to church. We may feel uncomfortable speaking out and taking action regarding them. So did Jeremiah.' He was a retiring, self-conscious man, dragged reluctantly into the vortex of public affairs. His life was a prolonged agony in which both grief of mind and pain of body tested his faith and determination.'¹ So much so that some scholars think his life may have been the model for Isaiah's picture of the suffering servant-a vision ultimately and perfectly fulfilled in Jesus. Yet Jeremiah's trust in the faithfulness of God was unwavering. His message from God was supremely one of hope, enshrined in a new covenant which God would eventually make with his people. A covenant based not on external religious observance-rules and rituals- but written on the heart. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people". (Jer. 31³³)

In the last few days, we in the churches of Beverley have been celebrating a Festival of Life, and inviting our fellow townsfolk to look at us and take part in what we do. I hope we have been very clear about exactly what it is that we are inviting them into. It is nothing less than an alternative way of life, a swimming against the tide of priorities that so often dominate our society. A way of life based on the amazing Good News of the Gospel- that God-in-Christ has intervened in human history to turn the tide of sin, selfishness and empty values and reconcile the world to himself. That, as we gaze on his cross and open our hearts to him, **his** heart will be open to receive and return our love. In Jesus we discover our own inestimable value in God's sight, and we are given confidence to embrace others and give them the worth that is their due. That is the only way of life that is worth living. I'd like to close with some words by the Archbishop of York:

"Total devotion to God and love of neighbour, as Jesus has shown us by giving up himself to suffering and death on the cross, are the only foundation rock we are to build on, as individuals and as Great Britain. Individualism and consumerism are sand. Freedom, Fellowship, service for God and neighbour, and the rule of law are rock. These are the firm foundations for Britain's future."² "Amen.

1. William Neil's One Volume Bible Commentary, Hodder and Stoughton 1973
2. John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, in "On Rock or Sand? Firm foundations for Britain's future." SPCK 2015 p.258

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