



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Singleness of heart and action

By Rev Dr Keith Garner

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Jeremiah 32:39

³⁹ I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me and that all will then go well for them and for their children after them.”

You join us in the Wesley Theatre for the second of a short series of three winter addresses from the Old Testament. Last week I looked at Isaiah ⁴³ and the nature of God who brings us through even the most difficult of times ... particularly focusing on some of the powerful metaphors which are familiar within our Australian context even today.

- passing through the water
- the river which swells but does not overwhelm us
- walking through the challenge of fire.

We saw the relationship of Isaiah's words, as a prophecy from God, applying to the reality of suffering in our world in both a corporate and an individual setting.

This evening I turn to the Book of Jeremiah which comes at the close of one of the longest and darkest periods in Judah's history. God called an outspoken prophet to bring a message in challenging times. The book is full of turmoil, often seen in national tragedy. In such a context there comes the rediscovery of God who will bring his people back in difficult days.

The prophet is almost certainly in prison; a fact that is confirmed and attested to at the beginning of Chapters 32 and 33:

“The army of the king of Babylon was then besieging Jerusalem, and Jeremiah the prophet was confined in the courtyard of the guard in the royal palace of Judah.” (32:2)

“While Jeremiah was still confined in the courtyard ...” (33:1)

The circumstances which led to Jeremiah's imprisonment are related in the previous chapters; suffice for us to note that Jeremiah was not only in prison, but also had endured:

- being flogged in the pillory
- a close brush with death.

It was a testing time for the prophet and his willingness to stand up and be counted would seem like madness to some. But Jeremiah was not a person of self-importance or one who enjoyed causing consternation for the sake of it. In point of fact he had to fight the temptation to remain silent and, from an inexperienced background, he was to become one of the great prophets of all time.

The people of God were in the wilderness, the prophet was in captivity and their experience as a people could be described as the monotony of desolation.

If ever I am travelling across Australia, one of the things that strikes me is the sheer barren expanse that defines much of what we see—of land that has never been developed. The people were in a similar situation ... yet God's word comes to such a people and at such a time through the words of the prophet.

In a way that is not dissimilar to our exploration in Isaiah's prophecy, it could be said that Israel found her soul in exile and this becomes the basis of her return.

When Jeremiah received the prophetic call from God, he was commissioned to proclaim a double message:

"See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and to tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant." (1:10)

His prophetic mission was to speak God's word which was of judgement, as well as a word of promise and hope. There must have been times when Jeremiah wondered when—if ever—God would help him to see his hope brought to fruition.

In his commentary, Derek Kidner talked of Jeremiah's motivation being that of 'sober faith'. It must have seemed as though Jeremiah was always 'swimming against the tide'. I find this helpful, because we can relate to it in our own day when:

- we hold to values that are not widely accepted
- our mission and ministry has a prophetic edge to it
- our work is set in times when people are struggling.

There seems to be a twin-theme of 'captivity and return' which is both emerging and will be sustained in the words of Jeremiah.

We are grateful to Baruch, who is Jeremiah's scribe. This helps us to understand our reading whole sections in third party. This can be explained by the way this relationship is explained to us in the text of Jeremiah itself:

'So Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and while Jeremiah dictated all the words the Lord had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them on the scroll.' (36:4)

But Baruch's role was even greater than a mere scribe. Because of the restrictions placed upon Jeremiah, Baruch was called upon to read the words on occasion. (34:6)

The call of Jeremiah had some distinct qualities about it which are described for us in the first chapter of the Book of Jeremiah.

- Jeremiah was no haphazard choice (v.5)
- Jeremiah was no eager prophet (v.6)
- Jeremiah had a great remit (v.10)

The words of the text that I share with you are heard by us through the prism of our understanding of Jesus Christ and we sense the way we discover that hope can be found even as the storm gathers.

TEXT: Jeremiah 32:39

'I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them.'

The text makes a valuable link between the present and the future. God's message of hope is not only for our own good—but also for the good of our children and our children's children—'heart' is the inner-disposition and 'action' is the way we live.

We receive the word of the prophet in our own day at a time when we can easily become despairing about our own community in a modern city where far too many feel lost and insignificant. God wants to lift our heads to look with confidence at what he is doing.

William Neil, writing about the Prophets of Israel, referred to Chapters 30 to 33 as 'an interlude of hope'. The chapters stand in sharp contrast to the gathering storm. They could be said to form two parts of a book within a book, offering a new sense of hope. Indeed it is in this section that we read of the hope of a new covenant between God and his people (31:31–34). A God-given dream is offered when the things to come will be radically different from the times of despair.

Such words are an encouragement at times when people are inclined to yield to more negative thoughts.

So, using Jeremiah's prophecy, we look at both its original context and also seek to make connections with our own day.

God will restore His people with purpose

Jeremiah 32 and particularly verses 36–44 speak about the God of promise who offers restoration to his people. This hope comes to a people who feel the exact opposite of hope because of the circumstances in which they find themselves.

God is always seeking to restore his people and yet it requires a response on their part. So, out of captivity and exile, cut off from all that brought meaning to their lives, they are to discover that God has not forgotten them ... quite the contrary ... he is calling them back through restoration.

I want to draw your attention to the fact that God's restoration is to bring purpose back to people. This is the deeper and most profound aspect of hope!

In their place of desolation, just as in a desert place, little appears to live. Likewise, whenever a community loses hope, the issue is a serious matter and requires a community to rise to real purpose and meaning. It is in just this way that Jeremiah had a distinct sense of call to his people whose hearts were heavy and who needed to find purpose once again. This thought resonates with aspects in our own day, at a time when:

- family life so often lacks depth and meaning for many
- there is a need for the awakening of more compassionate care
- there is an all too prevailing sense of selfishness which people are prepared to leave unchallenged.

Baruch gives us an insight into how the prophet responds to the situation of his day. As the Babylonian army closed in on the city of Jerusalem, everyone, even the most positive of them, must have felt that a complete rout was the only outcome they could envisage. Jeremiah had a far more positive perspective and was able to see beyond to a more hopeful day.

Whilst he was under arrest, he had more freedom than the experience of prison might usually communicate; rather like Paul in the New Testament, the conditions were not totally intolerable. As a consequence, Jeremiah was able to carry out a business transaction. He

bought a field in his native village of Anathoth, which would communicate to all who observed his actions that he saw hope beyond the immediate feelings of despair that were experienced by many. He saw beyond the impending circumstances to a day of freedom and hope.

This was very typical of the way Jeremiah exercised his leadership. We too are called to see beyond the present situation and offer hope to our community.

As I drive from the city each evening, I pass an electronic scoreboard that tells me the state of the Stock Market with the latest ASX figures. Those figures have an arrow by them which is either green or red. Is that the source of our hope? I think not!

Every week our newspapers remind us of the latest property trends and for some this is a matter of great importance. Do the fluctuating figures on the prices of homes form the basis of our hope? I think not!

We have lived through one of those weeks of political turmoil. Do politics either left or right provide us with ultimate hope? I think not!

Thankfully God's word of restoration lifts us above these things. Jeremiah executed a detailed property transaction when all the above indicators might have advised him otherwise. This might have seemed the height of folly, given the imminent takeover which Jeremiah had already foretold! But the transaction does speak of hope, because people will be able to live in their homes once again, farm their fields once again, and build for the future. This word of hope comes at a most difficult time in the story of a people who might well be feeling the exact opposite of hope.

The Christian Church has a three-fold task: to bring women and men into a vital relationship with Christ and then to both fashion a world which can make life meaningful for them, in addition to offering hope, to look beyond the immediate causes of despair toward something better.

God will re-establish His people with priorities

The prophets had looked forward to more than just the physical return of a people. This was the renewal of a bond between God and the people themselves. This is perhaps why Jeremiah describes the contrast between the old and the new. Though they are different, they build on one another.

S J Marriott's words come in useful: 'I wish those people who tell us that Christianity won't work would be kind enough to tell us what will. Moreover, how do they know that it won't? You cannot say anything is a failure until it has been tried. When was Christianity last tried?'

It was G K Chesterton who wrote, 'Christianity has not been tried and found wanting: it has been found hard and not tried.'

The priorities of any community, as well as that of an individual, tell us a great deal about the nature that lies beyond the immediate and presenting. Each and every generation has to learn what it means to be a community of hope and to establish priorities which will last longer than just for a day. Such priorities for us will need to speak with clarity to some of the issues of our own day:

- to a generation of young people who are struggling to make sense of what it means to be community

- to many poorer people who are confronted every day with the message that money matters more than anything else
- to the increasing number of lonely people who feel isolated and lacking in quality relationships.

God is always seeking to restore his people and, when such hope is in place, it issues forth in renewed priorities. John Schmidt tells of Tolstoy's story of a man who stopped to give alms to a beggar. To his dismay, he found he had left his money at home. Stammering his explanation, he said, 'I am sorry, brother, but I have nothing.' 'Never mind, brother,' was the beggar's unusual response, 'that too was a gift.' The one word 'brother' meant far more than money.

If we are to discover new priorities they will be more than mere social programs but a new way in which we relate to one another. Jeremiah was by nature a sensitive person and he would find standing out alone difficult. Martin Luther described Chapters 30–33 as 'The Little Book of Comfort'.

God will always call His people forward

God makes good all his promises and the result will always take a people forward. These chapters in the middle of Jeremiah call us to look beyond the immediate to something more positive. Could that have something to say to you?

There are so many reasons why we can feel despondent:

- our Christian witness is not at the centre of national life
- religious language is little understood by the majority of people
- our Christian faith is often ridiculed and marginalised.

But we are called to live above our present experience and to plant our feet and our lives into something more hopeful.

Kathleen O'Connor, in her study on Jeremiah, described the situation of the people in this way: 'The people ... are taken captive, dragged from their land, and deprived of their Temple. They are beaten, imprisoned, and face death as a people, and, like Jeremiah, they cry out to God in anger and despair.'

Who can blame God's people for feeling there is no real hope? Despair may be considered one of the most human of conditions. Despair is characterised by the conspicuous absence of hope, but God has something better to say, if only we would hear it!

Jeremiah speaks about the singleness of heart and action. A restored people are united in a covenant with each other.

- One people—gathered together.
- One body—joined to one another.
- One kingdom—giving purpose and meaning.