

Pentecost XIII (21C)
Jeremiah 1.1-10/Hebrews 12.18-29/ Luke 13.10-17
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
26 August 2007

Heaven is in our Hearts

~Paul H. Friesen~

Our world, as you know, is full of folks like us who like to offer their opinions about God.

Perhaps God is far away and uninterested in us; it seems as if God has a clipboard and is following us around noting good and bad; or God is cruel and plays with our lives; or God is kind but doesn't want to interfere too much, or God just isn't—God was invented only to justify sexism or racism or just 'the way things happen to be.' Or maybe God was invented to comfort us and give us a false hope in a universe that is actually meaningless. Much can be said about each of these opinions.

But what is God's opinion of humanity about you and me? Of course no proof can be offered that Jeremiah spoke for God, but for thousands of years Jews and Christians have believed that Jeremiah did speak on behalf of God. So it might be good to just let Jeremiah's words sink into our minds before we jump to conclusions, and offer yet more opinions about God.

Jeremiah *ben* Hilkiyah seems to have descended from a community of priests first exiled by King Solomon to the town of Anathoth. This happened because of the disloyal actions of a certain Abiathar during the civil war that followed King David's death many years before. The town was outside Jerusalem and its old priestly clan was not recognized by the descendants of Zadok who was made high priest in Jerusalem by Solomon in Abiathar's place.¹

One can easily appreciate Jeremiah's immediate objection to God's opinion of him.

Jeremiah must have figured he was the last person in Israel to whom God would want to speak. And to top it off, the first divine opinion that Jeremiah hears is *not* about the state of his nation or the temple, but about Jeremiah himself.

'Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you".'

¹ The story is told in *I Kings* 1.22-27; 2.26-27, 35. See Louis Stulman's observations in *Jeremiah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), p.39-40.

But how could this be—how could a descendant of a rejected caste of priests be noticed by God—and set apart, ordained, consecrated by God for anything? But Jeremiah was not the first to have heard this sort of opinion from God.

In one of the *psalms* of David the psalmist cries out to God, ‘When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou has ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him...For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands.’² Why should Jeremiah be surprised that God had ordained him too?

Another *psalm* of David raises the particular struggles of its author as he addresses God: ‘Wither shall I go from thy spirit? Or wither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou are there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there...

‘I will praise thee for; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.’³ If this panic-stricken psalmist couldn’t shake off God, why should Jeremiah be surprised that God was pursuing him to tell him that Jeremiah had been set apart for a purpose?

But Jeremiah was surprised just as we are surprised that God knows us and has a purpose for us. This was and is God’s opinion. Jeremiah’s purpose—to speak with God’s voice about the rise and fall of might empires—might not be ours, yet his excuses echo our own. Jeremiah spoke back to God: ‘Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’ He did not share God’s opinion about himself.

‘I do not know how to speak.’ I do not know how to lead. I do not know how to help people in distress. I do not even know how to understand what I am supposed to do. It seems that we are all skilled in ‘not knowing’ many things.

And we are all skilled in not being the right people. ‘I am only a boy.’ Or I am too old. I am from the wrong kind of family. I am the wrong gender or from the wrong town or the wrong profession. I’m really not very religious. And so on.

But God begged to differ when it came to Jeremiah, and he begs to differ when it comes to us.

‘But the Lord said to me, “ Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you”.’ Jeremiah had confused, as we often do, God’s confident opinion about us with God’s leaving us to our own devices. Jeremiah was not asked to take on the

² *Psalm 8.3-6, King James Version.*

³ *Psalm 139.7-8, 14. King James Version.*

world out of his own resources. He was only asked to take God's own words to those who actually needed to hear them.

'Do not be afraid of them (whoever 'they' might happen to be), for I am with you,' said the Lord to Jeremiah and to us.

And before Jeremiah had a moment to raise more objections, God acts: 'Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth.' It was obviously something Jeremiah never forgot, just as Isaiah never forgot the vision of the angel who God sent to meet his own objections—the angel who took a live coal from the altar in the temple and touched his lips with it.⁴ Jeremiah's lips were filled with words; he was fit to do God's work.

Christians confess that Jesus Christ was a prophet like Jeremiah, but far more than a prophet—the birth, and life, and death, and resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ himself was God's ultimate message to humanity. As St. John put it: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'⁵

In today's Gospel we see Christ speaking out God's opinion, overturning the twisted priorities of religious authorities who said: 'Sorry. We have a policy. No healing on the Sabbath—come back tomorrow.' We see Christ laying hands on the woman crippled for eighteen years, expressing God's opinion of her, raising her to health—to the joy of the crowds who had come to worship God. We see Christ revealed as God.

It would be a pity if Christians had less confidence in God's opinion than Jeremiah did. In the end, Jeremiah did go where God called him and did speak what God gave him to speak. And Christians have the one who Jeremiah could not yet really see in his day, the one called the Word of God. Jesus Christ was God's opinion, the full and complete expression of God's attitude toward us and the rest of humanity—the people worth dying for.

God was willing to die for us, and did die for us, in the person of Jesus Christ. But Jesus Christ was also born for us, and lived for us and was raised to life for us, and was glorified for us. In the words of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, which we heard read last Sunday, Christ was the 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith.'⁶

Where Jesus has gone, Christians follow.

God's opinion we confess to be true. God's word we confess to be Jesus. And in the wonderful language of the heritage of some of this, 'Jesus is in our heart.' We carry God's Word within us.

Jeremiah's call to take God's message is the call of every Christian—not to go where Jeremiah went and say what Jeremiah said, but to know that Jesus is

⁴ *Isaiah* 6.6

⁵ *John* 1.1. *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁶ *Hebrews* 12.2 *New Revised Standard Version*.

within us. When we say we follow Jesus' path, it is possible because Jesus is within us.

We have far more even than Jeremiah had. We have Jesus in our hearts. As the Eastern Orthodox theologian Anthony Bloom put it: don't go looking for God 'out there' because God is already living within us.

We are reminded of this at every Eucharist, when we eat bread and drink wine like Jesus' disciples first did. We are not cannibalistic as some ancient critics of the Church put it. We are simply confessing that Jesus is within us in the most powerful way possible—Jesus' birth and life and death, his resurrection and his ascended glory are so much apart of us that we can say we eat and drink Jesus. We are so in need of remembering this that we were told to do this whenever we gathered together for worship.

Today's reading from *The Epistle to the Hebrews* is full of references to 'Mount Zion', 'the city of the living God', 'the Heavenly Jerusalem', 'a kingdom that cannot be shaken', and (finally) 'to Jesus' as the one who sums up the Christian life.

The author has taken the many symbolic terms for the essence of God's people, ancient Israel, and seen in Jesus their fulfillment. Eusebius of Caesarea, reading this passage 1700 years ago said: 'Nor would you be wrong in calling Zion the soul of every holy and godly person.'⁷ A contemporary English song writer has summed it up with the phrase 'Heaven is on our hearts.'⁸ F.F. Bruce, the great evangelical scholar put it this way: 'the privileges of [Zion's] citizenship are already enjoyed by faith.'⁹

Whatever the biblical metaphor, and whatever the best language is to connect it to our lives, Christians should make no mistake. The message of God given to Jeremiah was fulfilled in Jesus Christ who has set down roots in our heart.

Like Jeremiah we have doubts and reservations and fears. But we are all called to hear God's voice, in the many ways it comes to us in the confidence that 'God's opinion' of us is the truth.

If we had no promise that God has taken up residence in us we could not be bold. But every time we eat the bread and drink the wine of the Eucharist we are told God's opinion. God is within us, and to live in that astonishing knowledge is to live as Jeremiah learned to live, is to live as Jesus Christ lived.

God has no other plan today, than Jesus. God has no plans to wave his hand and change the world. God has already done that in Jesus. If the Gospel is to be announced, if the hungry are to be fed, if lies are to be refuted, if joy is to

⁷ In his 'Proof of the Gospel', see *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Hebrews*, ed. Erik M. Heen and Philip Krey (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p.223.

⁸ The author is, I think, Graham Kendrick.

⁹ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p.357.

be brought it will be through us—we are Christ's body, Christ's arms and legs and mind and voice, as St. Paul never tired of telling the earliest Christians. Thanks be to God!