

Pentecost XX (28C)  
*Jeremiah 29.1-9/Psalm 66/II Timothy 2.8-16/Luke 17.11-19*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
14 October 2007

### The Word of God is Not Chained

~Paul H. Friesen~

I have mentioned in the past month or so that I've had grown-ups ask me what my thoughts were so far on the Bible verses for the next Sunday, and children tell me what exciting things to preach on. None of that this week.

But when I finally had a few hours on Thursday afternoon to put down a few thoughts for this sermon, I headed to the library where I found an anonymous piece of advice. On the table, at which I usually sit and write, were four books on 'liturgical movement'—on how to get your church (of whatever denomination) to dance meaningfully in worship! I thought about it for a moment... And then I decided to leave dancing to the children who already do it as they return from Sunday School and join us around the table.

And then I sat down and returned to the astonishing words from *Jeremiah* that I had been thinking about for a few days: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel... "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare".'

Can God have really said this? And if God did, did it make any sense? And if it did make sense, long ago, why on earth should we pay any attention to it now? Doesn't ever prophet claim to speak for God? Didn't this prophet, Jeremiah, condemn the sins of nations like Babylon? And why were the people of God told to be happy in a foreign county that had destroyed the land God had promised Israel? And in any case we're not Israel, are we?

We've heard the story from the Bible many times, even if we find it hard to accept. The ancient Israelites had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, and given a land of their own. They had been sent into exile because they had wandered far from God and had begun to despise each other. They had learned to worship false gods and turned the kingdom into a land of cruelty and injustice. How could they to learn to be happy in Babylon, the land of their exile, their punishment? Hadn't Jeremiah told everyone that one day they would return to their land? Wasn't that the sweet promise that awaited them when the misery was all over?

In fact, Jeremiah had told them all that after their exile their great grandchildren would return to Israel. They were beginning to see a faint light in the distance. But how could they settle down in the meantime? How could they do anything but grit their teeth and sit on their hands?

The language Jeremiah uses must have been powerful in the ears of the exiles who had been taken back to the land that their ancestor Abraham had fled. They had taken Abraham's journey of faith in reverse. He had fled a godless and cruel land when he had heard God's voice, and become the father of a righteous nation.

And yet here was Jeremiah using language inspired by the opening chapters of *Genesis*. Do you remember it? 'God blessed [Adam and Eve] and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth"...God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.'<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah now provided the echo for the exiles in Babylon: 'Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for you sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there and do not decrease.' This was not a hasty, short term plan.

On top of it all they were actually to pray for the mighty Babylonians in whose land they were forced to live—and to 'seek its welfare', because God said that their own good was wrapped up in the good of the land of Babylon.

In fact we don't hear this only from Jeremiah, but we hear it from many voices in the Bible—in *Daniel* and *Esther* and *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*. 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile.' And we hear it from St. Paul. In his *Letter to the Romans*, he tells the church at the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities ...those authorities that exist have been instituted by God...Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.'<sup>2</sup>

Never were the ancient Israelites or the early Christians told to obey unjust laws or imitate corrupt officials. But God's people were told to respect the larger ways in which God governed the world. They were told to not confuse their own plans for God's work with God's divine providence—God's own ways among us.

And this morning we are asked to hear what the ancient Israelites and the early Church heard. *Put negatively* it was: don't waste time planning the perfect divine world on God's behalf. *Put positively* it was this—learn to live fruitfully where God has planted you. Who was praised in the story from the Gospel? Not the nine locals, but the Samaritan, the 'foreigner', as Jesus pointed out. He was the one had learned to live with gratitude in his heart. So we are called to live, whatever our state of exile.

We spend a fair bit of time, don't we, wishing we were somewhere else, far sooner than we could possibly arrive there.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Genesis* 1.28,31. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted.

<sup>2</sup> *Romans* 13.1,7.

Like the children in the back seat of a car we sometimes spend more time asking 'Are we there yet?' and 'How much further?' then we spend enjoying the journey—being fruitful.

Sometimes the godly thing to do is, with the mercy of God, to try to change the circumstances in which we find ourselves. But often we're not being godly, we're just being impatient. We're imagining our desires for change are God's desires too—so we ask why isn't God fixing it up for us.

What did Paul say in today's Epistle? 'Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my Gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. *But the word of God is not chained.*' The Apostle did not confuse his own situation with the wider, wonderful work of God. On the other hand, he learned to live in the light of the Gospel, especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is true at two levels.

*First, we may feel chained, and discouraged, in our own personal situations. We don't need to be!* Our first instinct is to shake loose. After all, we live in a world of short-term contacts and limited responsibilities and covenants that can be legally dissolved. There is often not too much to encourage us to learn from our circumstances, to actually live in the present that God has granted us. Jeremiah, St. Paul, and the Samaritan leper had learned to live in the light of God's providence—God's loving, long-term care of the world.

We struggle with the limitations of our job, our home, our marriage (or singleness), our family (or lack of it) our income, our friends (those we want but don't have, and those we have but don't we really want). Should we not pray about these things? Yes, of course! Should not a wife or children be rescued from an abusive family? Certainly.

But, usually, to learn to live fruitfully is to learn to live as if God were present in our circumstances, because God is present. So we are meant to learn to live like the prophet Jeremiah and the imprisoned Apostle Paul and the Samaritan immigrant. 'Multiply there,' said God to Jeremiah's exiles, 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you...for in its welfare you will find your welfare.' We're not to spend our energy looking for escapes or quick fixes.

We can't always know why we're in the situation we're in. Often it's wrong to speculate. And even when we think we know why we are there, we can't easily change it. But we can know that God is present and at work, because God is everywhere, not just where we think he is. If God is present everywhere, if God is the 'creator of heaven and earth' and 'all things visible and invisible' he is with us.

And God asks to ‘multiply’ right where we are—to look for the good in it and to work for the good of our situation and all things and all people in it. We do this as Christians because we confess that Jesus Christ was born among us, and lived and died and was raised for us. This is the Gospel. No part of Christ’s life or ours is without meaning. No part of our life is beyond the grace of God.

*Second, we may feel chained, and discouraged, about the situation of the church. But we don’t need to be!* There are things to worry about in the church worldwide, the Anglican Communion, our diocese, or even our own parish. What thinking, feeling person hasn’t felt this? But the Apostle Paul wasn’t discouraged. ‘The word of God is not chained.’

Paul told Timothy to avoid two things: ‘avoid wrangling over words’ he says’ (for this drives us away from each other), and ‘avoid profane chatter’ he says (for this drives us away from God). Instead, we are to ‘rightly explain the word of truth’ (the ‘unchained word’) for which no one needs to feel ashamed before God. We are to apply the unchained ‘word of God’ to our situation rather than to assign blame to each other or to God.

If there is to be shame, we should save it for our conduct, not for our circumstances. How hard this is to learn! How wonderful it is when we ‘rightly explain the truth’ in our circumstances.

God is at work—in our personal circumstances, and in the church (and, of course, in the world at large). ‘The word of God is not chained.’ There is no limit to our fruitful living.

Perhaps you’ve heard the stories—of how Nazi death camp inmates formed philosophical societies and musical ensembles. Or the stories of great spiritual growth in the lives of those with a terminal disease. God is at work in every circumstance, unchained. We are to be fruitful because God is at work in our lives and in our church.

And we prepare ourselves for this by gathering around the Lord’s Table week by week. For what else are we doing but remembering the fruitful work of Christ within the same limitations as our own? What else are we doing but remembering his triumph in the midst of suffering and death? What else are we celebrating but that the Word of God can never be chained, regardless of our circumstances?

Amen.