



January 25th

THE NEW SHOFAR

I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5)

We must look where we have been in order to know where we are going.

About halfway through his ministry as prophet, the Babylonian empire under Nebuchadnezzar began expanding in the Middle East and Israel's existence was threatened. Jeremiah warned Israel about this threat, believing that he had received such warning words from God. But the people denounced him and beat him savagely. Their reaction left Jeremiah feeling like he was caught in the middle, squeezed between a God who has insisted that he preach this difficult word of warning and a people who refuse to believe him, who thought they had everything under control. He is stuck between an insistent God and a resistant people. Where does he go?

How does the prophet decide the way to proceed?

He begins by lamenting, a lament being a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. It is a cry from the soul, a reaching out to God when the world around us seems to be crashing down upon us and we have no way of containing it. When we lament we are uniting ourselves with God in anticipation of a divine intervention that will bring about a whole new world. It is, at the same time, a cry from someone who has to *walk through the shadow of the valley of death* before new life and light comes our way. The real problem becomes how I just want God to do something now. Today. Here in the midst of the present strife. What God has to do is what I want and how I want it.

I do all this for God, but what is God doing for me! God owes me!

Jeremiah, who is sometimes called the “weeping prophet,” had a difficult ministry. So difficult, in fact, that he one day exclaimed, *Cursed be the day I was born! May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!* He knew ministry was not going to be easy, but his troubles were more than he thought he should have to face.

In the midst of the persecution coming his way, God guaranteed that he would make Jeremiah like a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a wall of bronze. These are great images meant to signify a person kept safe from all threats. They also indicate how Jeremiah would be empowered by forces outside of himself and those powers would be what enable the prophet to successfully minister in the face of hostilities.

He presented a message of judgment, and judgment is not something people like to hear. He was tasked with telling the Hebrew people that exile in Babylon was inevitable because of their infidelity and covenant failures. Such an exile was all a part of the divine plan and they were to trust God. Unsurprisingly, that was an incredibly unpopular message, so much so that the leaders of his day sought to silence him, even killing him if necessary. The people were not about to let God run the show.

Are things all that different today?

As with many of the generations of believers have before us, Christians of the present era have similar challenges to overcome in our service of the Kingdom of God. It is dangerous to insist on the Truths of the Gospel in the face of a world so caught up in the centrality of the self, that there is little or no room left for God. As it was with Jeremiah, the pressure is on the faithful disciples of Christ to remain silent or to compromise on what God wants. Where are our “Jeremiahs” today?

The fate of Israel was exile in Babylon. As they failed to be all God called them to be, they suffered and all but disappeared. It was only through repenting and by listening to and heeding the call of God to faithfulness they were restored and reinstated in the land given to them by Yahweh. They repented. They renewed their covenant passion and lived as God demanded they live. Only then did they know divine blessings.

“Fear not”, says Jesus

Like the prophet Jeremiah, the temptation and the pressure is there to preach the Good News from God in a language that does not distress, challenge or annoy the world to which we are sent as salt, yeast and light. The world says euthanasia is love in different words. God says it is murder. The society approves of abortion as a woman’s right while God insists it is morally unacceptable. God also insists on marriage being between a man and a woman while we encourage governments to legislate for it. While God made two sexes, we remain quiet while society promotes seventy plus gender possibilities. The same God created every human person in his own image and likeness and yet we are told our world is to be seen through the lens of race and skin colour. To proclaim the will of God in these – and many other scenarios – will leave us like Jeremiah. Persecuted. Marginalised. Pilloried. Mocked and even gaoled. Our silence in the face of inevitable persecution has brought down a contemporary form of “exile” upon the Western Church. We are weak, have faded away and been reduced to a mere shell in many places. Lacking Jeremiah-like prophets in our ranks and led by bishops more like the priest Pashhur (Jeremiah’s compromised nemesis) than men of faith and courage we have nothing to offer the world but more of what it already has.

Christians have nothing to fear by speaking Gospel Truths – apart from suffering, exile, ridicule, persecution imprisonment and ... The world, however, has much to gain as communities once again align themselves with the creative purposes of God. Our task is to bring these divine plans into fruition, and we cannot do this through silence. That was Jeremiah’s dilemma. How to survive, remain popular and carry out God’s will in the face of opposition and doubt. Jesus’ answer is clear: ***fear not.*** God’s grace, God’s Holy Spirit comes alive within us and speaks through us. We do the hard yards of discipleship because we are God’s voice in the world in which we live. He speaks through us in both word and deed. Silence then is not an option and compromise a sin.