

25th August 2019

Preacher: John Lampard

Hymns: HYMN 134 “Christ, whose glory fills the skies”
 HYMN “Lord, here is one to be baptised”
 HYMN 51 “Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father”
 HYMN 666 “Master, speak! Thy servant heareth”
 HYMN 669 “The Saviour, when to heaven he rose”
 HYMN 663 “‘I, the Lord of sea and sky”

Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10
 Luke 13:10-17

HOW AM I CALLED?

A good question in a pub quiz is, ‘What is the longest book in the Bible? Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms? It may surprise some to learn that the longest book on a word count is Jeremiah. Considering that it is the longest book it is equally surprising that it is so little known. So, as they say in the army, ‘listen up!’

The prophet Jeremiah lived about 600 years before the birth of Jesus. Many of his prophecies, and some details about his life were recorded by his faithful scribe Baruch, so we know more about him than we do some prophets. He started off in good times when the young king Josiah came to the throne and introduced a time of religious reform and revival. You can imagine the young Jeremiah joining in enthusiastically.

But later things turned ugly under some very poor and corrupt successor kings. A renewed power, Babylon in the north-west, (modern day Iran) rose up and attacked Israel in 587BC. It destroyed Jerusalem, smashing down the Temple and desecrating it. Many of the inhabitants were driven into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah had warned against this for many years, and he was attacked and imprisoned for what he prophesied. He left Jerusalem (either willingly or as a hostage taken by fellow Judeans) shortly after the fall of Jerusalem and travelled south into Egypt. We know no more of him, presumably he died there.

So what is so special about Jeremiah? I want this morning to look at just one aspect of his ministry, the passage read a few moments ago, as he set out his own profound sense of being called by God. And I want to encourage you to apply it to yourself. What is your call? What is your vocation? Ask yourself, ‘How am I called?’

You will recall the opening words of the OT passage for today, ‘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, I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”’

Jeremiah reveals a widely known experience felt by people of all ages, that God knows us from before our beginning, plants a seed within us that at any stage can

take root. We heard a similar experience in Psalm 139, which we read a few minutes ago, that each of us is part of God's plan.

'For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I thank you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.' Of course Jeremiah didn't come out of his mother's womb shouting 'I want to be a prophet', but the seed was there because God was there and who knows what awakened it later in his life? A word, an event, a challenge? How do you hear your call?

Many years ago I was minister of a very large and successful church, one of the biggest in the country, filled with able, imaginative and committed people. But one day, looking through the membership list I discovered that, although there were several local preachers, none of them had become local preachers while members of that church. In fact, out of a membership of over 550 people the church had never produced a single local preacher. So, one evening with the young people's group, I spoke about God's call to be a preacher. Well, you know what young people are like. After my inspiring words the reaction? Well the words 'lead' and 'balloon' come to mind. 'Thanks, Revd, can we talk about something more interesting?'

But in subsequent years three of that small group responded to a sense of vocation and trained as local preachers. Later two of them entered our ministry. And of the adult membership of that church two more, many years later, entered our ministry, although I cannot claim any credit. All I did with the young people was to water a seed which God in Christ had planted in their mother's womb. Have I watered any more today?

While you ponder that, I want to acknowledge a major error in the trajectory of this sermon. In talking about God's call, our vocation, I have dived straight into what I would call 'churchy' vocations. Vocation is so so much wider.

In fact much of the thinking of the universal church over the last 50 years or more has been about, 'how does a Christian exercise their vocation in secular work and employment'? Tomorrow morning, when you are on your feet, serving, cleaning, rushing around, at your desk, stuck in a meeting, driving your car, attending to the clamorous needs of others, or even quietly at home, how do you exercise your Christian vocation? Then there is a subsidiary question, which I can only signal here but not answer, 'what help does the church's promotion of the Christian faith give you in your work, rather than try to suck you into supporting it?'

So how do you exercise a Christian vocation? How do you allow that seed, that call of God from your mother's womb, to blossom and flower? Let me offer you two pictures, one at a very small scale and the other at very large scale.

There was a very famous and wonderful Methodist minister who used to offer 'work experience' to people training for the ministry, just as Jen does here. But on the first day, as keen young student ministers arrived looking forward to receiving the spiritual wisdom and guidance of this great man, he would say, 'We had the youth club here last night, would you please give the toilets a really good clean?' Is that ministry? Is that vocation? Yes, of course it is.

One of the finest lines in a hymn is found in the words of George Herbert. He says that anything you do, if we allow it to be touched by God, is transformed.

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in any thing,
To do it as for thee:

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.

Very few of us live wholly isolated lives. Almost all of us interact with others. Wherever that may be – your travels and work-place tomorrow – you have a chance to act out your life-long Christian vocation by the way you treat other people, by the way you do your work, and the vision you have.

Many of you will know the old story of three people doing an identical job. One said, 'I'm laying bricks,' the second, 'I'm building a wall'. The third one said with a sense of wonder, 'I'm helping to build a cathedral'. Like Jeremiah, you are acting out your vocation from God if tomorrow morning you can say, 'I'm building a cathedral – to the glory of God'. And that can happen tomorrow whether you work in the service or hospitality sector, or in a top government or business office.

Before I move to my second example it is worth pointing out a warning lesson from the Gospel reading. We heard how Jesus approached a woman who was crippled and had been bent over and unable to stand straight for some 18 years. He laid his hand on her and immediately she stood up straight, and praised God. A simple lesson, a good deed produces a good result. But no. Read on. What he did produced indignation and anger. Never assume that if you do the right thing all will be sweetness and light. The loving caring act will not always be universally approved. But that does NOT mean we should not do it and be true to our vocation from God.

I've offered a small scale example of working out your vocation. I want to offer one on a much larger scale, which is inevitably more challenging.

For the last 40-50 years companies and corporations around the world have followed the philosophy of the economist Milton Friedman. He argued that the sole way of measuring the success of a company was how well it was able to reward its shareholders. A company was a 'success' if every year the shareholders benefited by receiving increased dividends and an increased share value. A 'good' company was a financially successful one with an eye all the time on profit.

This is raw or extreme capitalism, but it can infect the mind and assumptions of all of us. However, this last week a group of 181 of some of the biggest and most successful companies in the USA have come up with an alternative model for 'success'.

They say that in future they will re-define 'success' as 'improving our society'. New principles will include, 'Delivering value to customers', 'treating and compensating employees fairly', 'dealing fairly and ethically with suppliers', and 'protecting the environment'.

The cynic within me, and perhaps within you says, 'we've heard it all before – it's all a PR exercise. But perhaps it is a response within tough and hard-headed business people to a sense of vocation – an awareness of God calling for a new attitude to the world. My understanding of God at work in the world means that ultimately I cannot dismiss it. And perhaps there are people listening to this, who have not heard about this initiative, might be in a position to take it up in their company or firm, however small.

Let me end with a story from the life of Jeremiah. As disaster loomed over Jerusalem, Jeremiah advised the people to flee the city so they had a chance of surviving. This 'defeatism' upset the city officials and he got permission from the bad king Zedekiah to deal with him. 'He is in your hands', he said. Jeremiah was arrested, a rope was tied round him and he was thrown into a deep water cistern. We read that there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud. Eventually, some time later his friends got permission to rescue his weak and emaciated body from the mud. They lowered ropes to him, but also dropped down some old rags and worn out clothes. One of them called down into the cistern, 'Just put the rags and the clothes between your armpits and the rope. So he was pulled out and his body was not damaged or torn by the ropes because of the old rags. It was an act of salvation, but an act of salvation carried out with thoughtfulness and tenderness. He was restored to his friends and he continued to prophesy fearlessly.

Your calling may not to be a fearless prophet. But perhaps it is always to have some rags ready so you can bring comfort, hope and well-being to those you meet. Is that how you are called?

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