

Calling someone a Jeremiah is not good. Being a Jeremiah is like being called an Eeyore, but on a much grander scale. Both are pessimistic about the present, but Jeremiahs predict calamitous futures and the certain end of civilisation as we know it.

At the moment, I have to confess to feeling a bit Jeremiah-like about our own country. Sermons are not the place to be political, so I won't mention Brexit, but we've not done well on prime ministers recently and MPs have over-whelmingly endorsed the investigation into Boris Johnson that he lied to parliament on multiple occasions.

But at least in our country one can be a Jeremiah. It may come at a cost, but to use a word constantly used in the New Testament, we are called to be 'bold' (parresia), that is to speak the truth openly even if this causes derision and ridicule.

Jesus said (in today's Gospel reading) about being bold, 'What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light, and what you hear whispered proclaim from the house tops' (Mt 10:27).

Of all the prophetic figures in the Old Testament, Jeremiah stands out for his boldness, his courage and humanity. If he could be here today, he would be telling me off for being politically coy and a wimp. It is rare for prophets to be referred to outside their own prophetic books, but Jeremiah is mentioned many times. In the New Testament, when Jesus asked his disciples who the people think he is, they replied that many thought he was the reincarnation of Jeremiah (Mt 16:14).

Jeremiah was born into a priestly family around 650 BC and called to be a prophet in 626. He admired the reforming and pious king Josiah but after his death this all changed with the succession of the King Jehoiakim. Jeremiah felt compelled to speak out against the king's

idolatry and political alliances. After the fall of Nineveh in 606, Jeremiah warned against possible invasion by the Babylonians, and very unusually suggested they made an alliance with them.

But the new King Zedekiah had other plans and sidled up to the other super-power, the Egyptians. This proved, as Jeremiah predicted, to be disastrous. The authorities tried to silence him by throwing him into a pit, but this did little to silence him and his powerful oracles of warning.

In 596 Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians and in 586, the leading members of the city along with Jeremiah were exiled to Babylon.

Jeremiah was motivated by an overwhelming sense of God's call to truth and justice. Famously he argued that God's covenant with his people is not external cut on tablets of stone but internal cut into our hearts. We can see where Jesus got his idea that the covenant is love.

When his words failed to change the authorities' minds, Jeremiah used other tactics. Just before the passage we heard this morning Jeremiah had taken an earthenware jug and dramatically smashed it as a symbol of the brokenness of the political system. It is a dramatic gesture akin to the satires we read in the papers or see on the stage or television today.

But it came at a cost. In proclaiming the brokenness of society, Jeremiah himself feels broken.

For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long' (Jeremiah 20:8)

The people mock him by quoting his own words against him, 'I hear many whispering: "terror is all around"' (Jer 20:10); the very words Jeremiah has just used to describe Pashur the corrupt senior Temple priest in Jerusalem.

He is exhausted by his task, physically and mentally. Even his friends are waiting for him to slip up and fall into corruption so they can accuse him of hypocrisy.

All this, I think you will agree, is very familiar in our own times.

Yet, Jeremiah is no 'Jeremiah'. At heart he is *not* a pessimist and he does *not* believe in a calamitous future – even though as a member of an exiled community he, along with them, must often have experienced a sense of failure and alienation. For unexpectedly at the end of his dismal confession, the ray of God's hope breaks through:

Sing to the Lord, praise the Lord!

For he has delivered the life of the needy, from the hands of evil doers. (Jer 20:13)

Jesus said to his disciples, 'It is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher' (Mt 10:25). We of course have Jesus as our teacher, but he in turn had the prophets as his teachers and in particular Jeremiah. So, that means we also can learn from Jeremiah - in particular his boldness and outspokenness for truth and faithfulness to God, even though it caused him much anguish, ridicule and emotional suffering.

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