

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 3 January 2016
A Contemporary Reflection by Mr Ben Skerman
Christmas 2C

Jeremiah 31: 7 -14; Ephesians 1: 3 -14; John 1: 10 -18

We live in a time of many prophets. Perhaps it has ever been thus. We can choose between News Corp prophets and Fairfax ones; ABC and Commercial Radio and Television, Labor Liberal and Green and so on, ad infinitum. Each has their own message of doom and view of what action is required to prevent it. However, when doom arrives, such as World War II, or the Great Depression, a different sort of prophecy occurs. A new world is imagined in which such events cannot occur and which is better than the old one. An outcome of such a process is the Welfare State. Another is the United Nations.

Something like this happened more than two and half thousand years ago. The remnant of Israel, exiled for three generations in Babylon sought to explain the destruction of God's Chosen People, the Children of Israel and imagine a better world. Over a period of 100 or so years 10 out of the 12 tribes of Israel had been wiped out and the remaining two had come close to extinction. The destruction was terrific. The Assyrian sieges of the 10 tribes were so effective that townspeople were forced to eat their dead to stay alive. When the city fell, all males were killed and women and children moved to other parts of the Empire, as slaves, and the cities repopulated. Ethnic Cleansing is nothing new. The remaining two tribes were lucky they were conquered by the Babylonians who did not go in for genocide. The leadership of Judah was removed to Babylon where during three generations of exile (70 years) it reinterpreted its history, reformed its religion, and preserved the records of those prophets who had got it right.

The destruction of the tribes was explained in terms of God's punishment of a disobedient and ungrateful people who had neglected social justice while maintaining elaborate ceremonies to worship God. Of equal, perhaps more, importance was that they had 'whored after other Gods', perhaps to hedge their bets in dealing with the Assyrians and Babylonians. Amongst the doom, gloom and horror of the prophecies are lengthy and beautiful passages about what the new world will look like, and how it will come about. This included God's forgiveness of an erring people. This was seen to have been fulfilled when, after 70 years, many of the exiles were sent back to rebuild their country and act as rulers of their people within the Persian (Babylonian) Empire.

Our reading is one such passage from a Prophet, Jeremiah, who lived in the reigns of Jehoakim and Zedekiah, and during the destruction of Jerusalem, partial destruction of Judah, and exile to Babylon. He drew heavily on the experiences of the ten tribes and constantly advised the King of the complete destruction of Judah - unless there were drastic changes. Jehoakim ignored his warnings and mocked him. Jeremiah's prophecies became more and more violent and are known as Jeremiads.

The reading comes to the reader as a breath of fresh air. At the time this oracle was made Jerusalem was being pounded by the siege engines of the Babylonians. Starvation stalked the streets and some people were reduced to eating their dead. Jeremiah was in prison as his utterances were not good for morale in wartime. Yet at this time he dreamed of what the future might be after God's punishment and cleansing of Israel had been completed.

The remnant of Israel is to be saved, brought back from the North (Babylon) and from the farthest parts of the earth where many had fled. They were all to be brought back, including the weak, and not just those required for rebuilding. They will be led back by the easiest and most pleasant route. Even Ephraim (code for the 10 tribes who had been destroyed), if any had survived, were included. Weeping would be replaced with joy and dancing, starvation with plenty. All was forgiven. God has saved them from powers which were too strong for them.

It took 70 years before any of this happened and even then some people chose to remain in Babylon. The stories in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah indicate that the rebuilding, and resettling, of Judah was not at all easy. The locals who had not been taken into exile did not necessarily welcome the returning exiles with their reformed religious practices and doctrines. Many became the despised Samaritans of the New Testament

Today is the second Sunday of Christmas, the ninth day of Christmas. The reading from John's Gospel is one of three New Testament Readings included in the Traditional Ceremony of Lessons and Carols held before Christmas. The other two readings are from Luke and Matthew. They are the ones that give the joy of Christmas, new birth, angels, shepherds, wise men. There are two accounts of conflict, but over the centuries we have conflated them. They are of the birth of an obscure baby of dubious parentage, born when his parents are temporarily homeless. He is recognised as unique by rural labourers (shepherds), who seem to be only people who heard the heavenly host, by eastern mystics, and by two elderly religious in the temple of Jerusalem. The residents of Bethlehem and Jerusalem were unaware of anything out of the ordinary having happened. These narratives emerged long after the event described and are told to establish the divine origins of the child, and as the fulfilment of the prophecies which had been preserved hundreds of years earlier by those in exile in Babylon. They are the heart-warming centre of Christmas.

The author of John's Gospel is not into narrative. The first chapter, our reading, is an attempt to synthesise and summarise the life and meaning of Jesus into as few words as possible. It is not a birth narrative and has always seemed to me to be out of place in the Ceremony of Lesson and Carols. Like the scholars in Babylon, the author of John was writing long after the event; three generations. During that time much thought had been given to the meaning of Jesus' life. The world had changed, Jerusalem had been destroyed by Romans and its survivors were scattered all over the ancient world. Judaism was reinventing itself for the second time, and local synagogues were replacing the central role which had been held by the Temple in Jerusalem. The sacred texts were being rewritten in what had become the lingua franca of much of the Roman World, Greek. Greek was used by Jewish Diaspora and with it came Greek patterns of thought. Christianity was gradually and painfully being separated from its status as a Jewish sect. It had spread through the Roman world with the Diaspora and attracted large numbers of Greek speaking people with no Jewish background. John's Gospel uses Greek patterns of thought - philosophical concepts, symbolism, and narrative as a method of interpretation rather than as a description of events.

In the familiar words from John's Gospel used in the Lessons and Carols: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended in not"*. John 1, 1-5.

The use of 'word' I find confusing. To me it makes sense to think of it as meaning that Jesus' teaching and way of life was the teaching and way of life of God. A similar concept to that of Wisdom, Sophia, in the Old Testament. But now it also seems to me that it is much more than that. It seems to include science and cosmology - the whole of God. Remember the creation story in Genesis, "*God said let there be light and there was light*"

Over the last three centuries we have gradually come to the view that events are not the result of supernatural intervention. Take the HIV /AIDS epidemic of the 80s and 90s, Ebola, the 2004 Tsunami, the Takeshima earthquake, and the recent Nepali one. Most people do not see these in Old Testament prophetic terms as divine punishment on a sinful generation. Rather they are seen as having natural causes, which can be discovered. These insights are then used to develop ways of preventing or minimising their harmful effects. Many people see our greater and greater understanding of how the world/universe works, and how to control natural forces, as proof that God does not exist - "*God is a hypothesis that is no longer necessary*". Others have seen this as an indication that some sort of Primal force does exist. Others adopt a position somewhere in between.

However, a belief based on the argument of design doesn't mean that this primal force/being gives a rats about you and me. There are laws of nature which have consequences if violated, - drinking contaminated water, building houses in bush fire or flood prone areas, pollution of the atmosphere. These are all impersonal. In the 18th Century Enlightenment, God was seen as the divine clock maker who constructed the earth, wound the key and then let it go on by itself. Perhaps this was a reaction to the scientific discoveries of Newton and Boyle and the writings of philosophers such as Leibniz. ("*Nature and Natures laws lay hid in sight: God said let Newton be and all was light*" - Alexander Pope). It may also have been aversion to the bloodletting of the previous 150 years in wars of religion. Enthusiasm about sectarian dogma kills people. Think of what is happening now in the Middle East. It takes a leap of faith to believe God exists and another one that God cares. Both are based on personal experience.

Our reading continues:

The Word was in the world that had come into being through him, and the world did not recognise him.

The Word came to his own and his own people did not accept him.

But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believed in the name of him who was born not from human stock or human desire or human will but from God.

The Word became flesh, lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father-Mother as the only Child of God, full of grace and truth.

Indeed, from his fullness we have, all of us, received - grace in return for grace,

for the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Christ Jesus.

No one has ever seen God; it is the only Child, who is nearest to the Father-Mother's heart, who has made God known.

There are two main points in this passage. The first is the idea that God became human and lived as a human being and knew what it was like. In other words, Jesus' life and works were so unique that he was interpreted, in this case three generations after his death, as demonstrating what God was like and was therefore God in Human form. The rest of the Gospel develops this theme as Jesus heals the sick, attacks injustices such as financial corruption in the temple, and teaches an alternative way of living and reason for living. This is done without a political framework. He is not concerned with gaining freedom from Roman occupation. He is concerned with the internal freedom of individuals. His life was so different, so challenging, that he had to be executed.

The example of his life and teaching, and experience of his continuing presence in the world, attracted many people then and does so now. Many adopted and are still adopting his teachings and way of life to the best of their ability. In the process they found freedom and joy. One of these freedoms was freedom from the law. In Jesus' time this was the Law of Moses, handed down by God at Sinai and interpreted and elaborated over the centuries, not least during the Babylonian Exile. Regulations and sub regulations covered every aspect of living. The process of obeying all the regulations became all consuming, and punishment was an ever present risk. Jesus freed people to follow the spirit of the law, to take risks.

"The Sabbath was made for people not people for the Sabbath".

The History of Christianity is replete with stories of people who have found 'freedom from the law', from established customs and beliefs, internal /spiritual freedom from repressive political regimes. These are people who have received grace upon grace, even if sometime this led to their deaths. Life, so lived, hasn't been easy but it has been joyous. The coming of the Word gave a meaning to life, a reason for living. There are people here who have experienced this. Often this has come out of periods of despair and pain not so after removed from those experienced by the Children of Israel and the exiles in Babylon.

Unfortunately, there are also many examples in the history of Christianity of people who have reimposed and are still imposing a multitude of laws. Non compliance is supposed to result in exclusion from grace or even damnation. There are also those who are sure they have received Grace and that all other people have not. Without their particular experience, other people are deemed to be beyond the pale and should be treated as such. The two groups are not mutually exclusive.

So what have we? In the words of Bernard Anderson, Jeremiah's God is "*one of judgement and renewal, doom and promise*". In John this God is not perceived as a God of Judgement and doom, but one who understands and has lived the human condition. This is a God of new life, - a life of freedom, joy, risk taking and fulfilment, modelled on the life and teachings of Jesus. This it seems to me is the meaning of Christmas.