

11th February 2024 Sunday 9.00 am and 10.30 am

THE LORD SAYS, SING WITH JOY AND SAY SAVE YOUR PEOPLE, THE REMANENT

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell
Presbyterian Church



READINGS:

Jeremiah 31:7-14

This is what the Lord says:

“Sing with joy for Jacob;

shout for the foremost of the nations.

Make your praises heard, and say,

‘Lord, save your people,

the remnant of Israel.’

8 See, I will bring them from the land of the north

and gather them from the ends of the earth.

Among them will be the blind and the lame,

expectant mothers and women in labour;

a great throng will return.

9 They will come with weeping;

they will pray as I bring them back.

I will lead them beside streams of water

on a level path where they will not stumble,

because I am Israel’s father,

and Ephraim is my firstborn son.

10 “Hear the word of the Lord, you nations;

proclaim it in distant coastlands:

‘He who scattered Israel will gather them

and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.’

11 For the Lord will deliver Jacob

and redeem them from the hand of those stronger than they.

12 They will come and shout for joy on the heights of Zion;

they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord—the grain, the new wine, and the olive oil, the young of the flocks and herds.

They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more.

13 Then young women will dance and be glad, young men and old as well.

I will turn their mourning into gladness;

I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow.

14 I will satisfy the priests with abundance, and my people will be filled with my bounty,”

declares the Lord.

John 1:10-18

10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

15 (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'")

16 Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

SENTENCE OF THE DAY

‘Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Isaiah 60:1

INTRODUCTION

Happy New Year ... and I wish you God's favour ... and blessing ... as the days and months of 2024 unfold.

So, we have now kicked last year into touch, and I trust we are ready to embrace all the opportunities and challenges, which the next twelve months will bring us.

What are your thoughts, I wonder, at this time?

What are your particular hopes, and fears,

- for yourself,
- your family,
- the community,
- the nation,
- and the church?

The newspapers and media are of course full of opinion pieces on our state of affairs ... because at some level ... we are all very interested ... if not a little anxious ... would you agree?

I can happily report that I had a fabulous Advent and Christmas.

And I am hoping this will continue,
notwithstanding, the obvious concerns we share.

Now, today's readings are very inspiring if not a
little counter intuitive.

I should like us to reflect on the Old Testament
passage from Jeremiah 31. I have called this
morning's sermon "[The Lord says, sing with joy
and say save your people, the remanent](#)".

My sermon title reflects the essence of Jeremiah
chapter 31 ... and did you notice the apparent
contradiction.

On the one hand Israel was encouraged to sing
for joy and to praise the Lord ... AND ... on the
other hand say ... pray save your people, the
remanent.

Hmmm

How can you do both, I wonder? Sing for joy?
Pray for salvation ... of a persecuted remanent?

Don't you think ... that if you are a remanent
that has been ground into the dust, impoverished,
and diminished ... it would be almost impossible
... to sing for joy to the Lord?

Don't you think it might be a little insensitive ...
perhaps unhelpful and unkind ... of the prophet
Jeremiah, to speak thus to the people?

Well, I do appreciate the direction that Jeremiah
gave to the people ... to pray to the Lord ... to
save the remanent ... that feels absolutely right ...
but singing for joy?

I will let you figure that one out! As you listen to
my sermon this morning.

**So, what is the context of this extraordinary
imperative to rejoice ... and to pray for God to**

save the remanent ... to save and deliver his people?

Let's read vs 15 of Jeremiah 31, which is not included in the reading this morning, but it provides the crucial context.

**“A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”**

Rachel is interpreted here as an individual ... and as a representative of the suffering mothers of Israel.

The verse ends ... almost in despair ... and is such a contrast to the celebration of Christmas, don't you think?

Rachel weeps while Mary rejoices.

Rachel's grief is inconsolable; she pushes away her comforters. Her children are gone, never to return, and she will weep the rest of her days.

So, who was Rachel? Well, the Biblical Rachel was the wife of Jacob (Genesis 29:28). And while she was traveling from Bethel to Bethlehem she stopped near Ramah. There **“Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty”** (Genesis 35:16).

She delivered a son in anguish and named him ... with her dying breath - Ben-Oni, meaning **“son of my trouble,”** ... although Jacob renamed him Benjamin (v. 18; cf. 1 Samuel 10:2).

But it is interesting to read the following verse – verse 16 – which says,

This is what the LORD says:

“Restrain your voice from weeping

**and your eyes from tears,
for your work will be rewarded,”
declares the LORD.**

**“They will return from the land of the enemy,
So, there is hope for your future,”
declares the LORD.**

**“Your children will return to their own land.”
(31:16–17)**

So, weeping ... but joy is promised?!

Now, John Calvin, the great reformer, called this
“a promise which moderates the grievousness
of the calamity.”¹

¹ John Calvin, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, 5 vols., Vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1989), p. 91.

You see, no matter what our experience is ... sorrow and grief ... they do not have the last word.

A mother may refuse to be comforted, but God will comfort her, nonetheless. “Rachel’s tears were not in vain and not for ever.”

Although I suspect she ... and other mothers in Jeremiah’s time ... did not feel this.

Well, Okay, so why was Rachel inconsolable in the first place?

- As an individual she died giving birth
- But as a representative of Israel in Jeremiah’s time she represents the suffering of God’s people

And to understand God’s comfort, one must first understand Rachel’s loss.

The prophet Jeremiah, in Jerusalem, could hear the sound of Rachel's sobbing (the mothers of Israel sobbing) ... coming all the way from Ramah.

You see, Ramah was a transit camp for refugees (cf. 40:1).

The Babylonians dragged their prisoners five miles from Jerusalem to a staging area at Ramah, where they were chained together for the long march to Babylon ... in exile.

It must have been a place of utter despair - fathers chafing against their chains, and mothers lifting their voices in lamentation.

Their children, their babies, were gone!

Some had starved during the siege of Jerusalem.

Others had been put to the sword during the invasion.

In the confusion of the battle, still others had been ripped from their mother's breasts, never to be seen again.

With her children dead or lost, it was only natural for Rachel – the mothers of Israel - to weep.

But eventually they must dry their tears.

The Puritan theologian Matthew Henry, explained it like this:

“We are not forbidden to mourn in such a case; allowances are made for natural affection.

But we must not allow our sorrow to run into an extreme, to hinder our joy in God, or take

us off from our duty to God. Though we mourn, we must not murmur.”²

Well, I do not know what you think, but I find that is fairly harsh advice ... given the depth of human suffering ... that Jeremiah is talking about here.

But I have discovered the Bible teaches us how to suffer. It is honest about the misery of the human condition, but it never wants us to give in to it.

Even those losses that seem inconsolable can be consoled. Not always in this life perhaps ... for we may carry some griefs to the grave ... don't you think.

Yet, by quoting Jeremiah, Matthew Henry wanted us to know that God intends to bring comfort and joy, even to the Rachels of the world.

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols., Vol. 4 (New York: Fleming Revell, n.d.), n.p.

Since Rachel and Israel's grief is great, her comfort must be even greater, so Jeremiah chapter 31 contains all kinds of comfort.

He now exhorts them to exult with joy, and to shout for joy ... for God has indeed heard their anguish and will come with healing and consolation.

And it must be noticed ... and really appreciated ... that this prophecy was announced,

... when the utter destruction of the people,

...of the city,

...and of the temple,

was not far distant;

but it was the Lord's intention ... through the prophet ... to ultimately comfort the people.

You see in Jeremiah's day, Israel was a "sick" nation, thanks to the superficial ministry of the false prophets (Jer. 6:14; 8:11), and the sickness deepened as time went by (10:19; 14:17; 15:18).

The wounds of the community were so bad ... that there was no medicine ... that could cure the nation.

And so, the Lord reminded them ... that it was he ... who used other nations ... to wound them ... because of their disobedience to him (30:14).

"But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds" was God's encouraging promise (Jer. 30:17, NIV).

God promised that Jerusalem ... and the cities of Judah will be rebuilt ... and that the fortunes of the people ... will be restored.

Their mourning will turn to joy ... and their children will again ... enjoy a normal life.

So, in the midst of Jeremiah's warnings and judgments, we come across a short, three-chapter section: chapters 30, 31, and 33.

This section is so unique ... and such a defined unit of scripture ... that it has come to be known ... as the Book of Consolations.

Now, I am sure that you realise Jeremiah is not a happy ... or particularly encouraging prophet ...

he spends forty years trying to warn the people ...

that disaster is coming ...

and for forty years the only attention he is paid ...

is punishment and hatred by the people.

So, Jeremiah's frustration and anger are perhaps understandable.

But Jeremiah is a true prophet ... and a true prophet's function ... is to speak the words of God.

And the words of God are ultimately words of consolation, of love.

Did you notice these consolations include ... some of the Bible's most loved passages and verses?

**“I have loved you with an everlasting love”
(31:3)**

and

“I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for their sorrow” (31:13) these are just two examples.

This is also a section ... in which Christians will recognize ... prophetic words ... that have come to be associated ... with the life of Jesus:

“A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children, and she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more” (31:15).

or

“In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land” (33:15).

These echoes help us tie Jeremiah’s words to the Christmas season, in which they are read.

Jeremiah is offering God’s people ... a promise of love ... redemption ... and renewal.

He sees what is going to happen - defeat and exile - but he also sees ... that God will not abandon his people.

Their punishment will not go on forever ... and God will save them ... both from their enemies ... and from themselves.

It is a pattern ... I have noticed ... that is repeated in every aspect ... of the life of faith, from:

- Jesus' crucifixion leading to the new life of resurrection,
- In addiction and recovery ... where the periods of decline and apathy ... precede spiritual renewal,
- to the dark and dry periods of personal ... and national history ... that precede spiritual and moral awakening.

You see nobody wants to hear that:

- pain comes before healing,
- or darkness before light,

- or dishonour before glory,

But Jeremiah could see ... that Israel itself ... was about to begin that cycle ... once again.

And the grace that is present in the cycle, is hope ... that God always gives in the hard times ... especially the promise ... that when the hard times are over ... we will be closer to God ... than we were before.

Now, I think this evokes the theme of the Christmas season ... and that theme is one of homecoming.

Jeremiah talks of Israel's exiles returning home ... and the homeland prospering.

The birth of Jesus is seen as the ultimate fulfilment of these promises of homecoming and restoration.

Jeremiah proclaims that the Lord will **“bring them from the land of the north ... and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth”** (v. 8),

and that

“with weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back” (v. 9).

And by demonstrating God’s own compassion ... Jeremiah makes a point ... of proclaiming ... that even those who could not otherwise be expected to make the journey ... they will be included,

“... among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour together” (v. 8).

For now, though, for us it was recently Christmas, and the emphasis remains upon the fulfilment of God’s promises.

And so, Jeremiah tells us that God is faithful ... and will return the exiles ... to their homes.

He will save his people and prosper them once again.

The miracle and wonder of Christmas ... God did not stop there ... remarkably he made his home with us as well ... in the person of the Messiah, Immanuel.

AMEN