

One of the major difficulties about Lectionary readings from the Bible, especially the Old Testament readings, is that they are so often read without any reference to or understanding of their context – and therefore little appreciation of what they actually meant at the time and might still mean for us today. Today's very brief and isolated reading from Jeremiah is a very good example. So settle down for a history lesson. Pay attention because there could be questions afterwards!

About 900 years before Jesus was born, the people we know as the Jewish people, or the Israelites as they're often referred to in our Bible, divided themselves into two separate nations. Five-sixths of them in the Northern territory became the Kingdom of Israel with its capital Samaria, the other sixth living in the South became the Kingdom of Judaea or Judah with its capital Jerusalem. Judah, generally, kept fairly strictly, with occasional lapses, to its worship of the one God Yahweh and centred its worship in the Temple that was eventually built in Jerusalem; Israel tended to be much more liberal in its approach and as well as continuing to believe in and worship the same Jahweh tended to allow and even encourage the setting up of shrines and worship centres to a whole variety of other gods and goddesses. The Judaeans more or less enforced a strict code of behaviour based on their understandings of God's laws and centred their worship in the Temple in Jerusalem; Israel continued to allow or even encourage other ways of worshipping the Almighty, often of a distinctly sexual nature and involving sacrificial and other rituals on various altars throughout their territory. Various Prophets from both territories denounced backsliders and warned of disastrous consequences of their immorality and false worship.

For 200 years Israel, the Northern section, suffered frequent disasters, invasions, wars, defeats and conquests, eventually leading to final defeat by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Thousands of the survivors were carted off into captivity and Israel, the Northern Kingdom, virtually ceased to exist. Judaea in the South suffered a few defeats as well, but not quite so disastrously. Prophets in both territories were very eloquent in their denunciations and made it clear that this was all the Work of God

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and should be seen as punishment for their waywardness. Repentance and return to the proper worship of the one God was the only way to see things put right.

Historically, of course, there was actually a much more practical reason for it all. Powerful Empires in the North such as Syria, Assyria and eventually Babylon always had a need either to conquer or to defend themselves against equally powerful Empires in the South, especially Egypt. The trouble was that both Israel in the North and Judah in the South lay slap between the two Empires and were constantly under threat from one or the other, usually both, of the Empires. Somehow, whatever military alliances each nation made to defend itself seemed to turn out to be the wrong one.

For the next hundred years or so Judah's people formed a variety of military alliances and the more they came under the influence of foreigners and their foreign ways the more they tended to neglect the worship of Yahweh in the Temple and the more they joined in with the worship and activities of their allies, again often of a distinctly sexual nature. Various prophets kept warning them that things would go dreadfully wrong for them if they didn't stop it and, sure enough, in 597 BC it happened. Judah and her allies were soundly defeated by the current Northern Empire, the Babylonians, Jerusalem was badly damaged, the Temple was looted and hundreds of survivors were taken into captivity in Babylon. "A voice was heard in Ramah" wrote one of the Prophets, " Wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be consoled because they are no more" – a note of bitter sadness later to be set in a different context relating to the birth narrative of Jesus of Nazareth, a Northern Jewish town.

For the next ten years, the people of Judah refused to accept their fate. Immorality and idolatry became the normal pattern of life and rebellion against their overlords in Babylon the national policy. Alliance after alliance was made until Babylon had had more than enough. In 586 Judaea was crushed with unimaginable violence, Whatever had been rebuilt in Jerusalem was razed to the ground, the Temple destroyed so thoroughly that it would not be replaced for the best part of a century, its

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treasures and its worship paraphernalia smashed up, melted down and taken away never to be returned, its leaders and its people killed or taken away into exile into the Babylonian Empire for two full generations.

For forty years, while all these disasters were unfolding, amongst many official Prophets, one in particular stood out throughout that time as sticking to his guns, no matter how unpopular and how much at risk that made him – Jeremiah.

And highly unpopular and seriously at risk he certainly was. Publicly vilified and mocked, threatened with death more than once, imprisoned, locked up in the stocks, subjected to physical violence, held under virtual house arrest, exiled and separated from loved ones and eventually immersed in thick mud at the bottom of a deep well with the lid fastened over it and left to die in a dreadfully long drawn out and mentally agonising manner. Mercifully, a sympathetic foreigner was prepared to risk his own safety and life by opening up the well and letting down a rope-ladder arrangement before hauling him out and getting him to safety.

Forty years of sticking to the same message. And that message which branded him as a traitor and public menace was this:-

Everything that is happening to you is the work of God; it is his punishment for your sin and apostasy; it is He who has raised up all these enemies and subjected you to all this violence and suffering in the hopes that you will come to your senses and start following and serve Him in the way that He has decreed. So stop trying to fight against it, give way to your enemies, stop trying to resist them and go along with their demands. If you insist on trying to resist them you are, in fact, resisting God. Subject yourselves to the Babylonians, don't fight against being exiled and accept the rule and way of life of the Babylonian Empire, settle down in the foreign country, get married, build houses, conduct businesses – but don't neglect your religious commitments; and if you do all that, eventually, after some 70 years or so you will find that God will be reconciled to you and that Babylon will be the new target and will be itself destroyed; your children and grandchildren will then be able to return to Judaea, rebuild your way of life as Judaeans, rebuild the

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Temple and once again live the kind of lives God has decreed for them.

Not quite the kind of message destined to make you terribly popular. It's as though If Jeremiah had lived in the late 1930's and 40's in England he would have been saying "Look, you know you've not been living the way you should have been and that you've virtually turned your backs on God. Now you're gearing yourselves up for war against Nazi Germany and forming all sorts of unwise alliances. Well stop it! Accept the fact that Hitler and his Nazis are the instruments God has chosen to punish you; submit to them. If they take masses of you off to live and work in Germany and the countries they've conquered, just accept it as your just desserts. Settle down, do whatever is required of you, obey their laws and rules, conduct your businesses and professions as far as you are able, become part of their 'family' as it were, and you will eventually find after a couple of generations that your children and grandchildren will find their way back to England and rebuild whatever way of life needs rebuilding and it'll be the Nazis' turn to get their come-uppance.

What! We put people in prison in those days for saying that sort of thing! Even as a child I can remember how people who said things like that were regarded as traitors! Indeed some of them were, and we know from our history that Hitler's agents were more than ready to work alongside leading members of the State to try to 'bring us to our senses'!

And for forty years, Jeremiah was saying all this sort of thing very publicly in the name of God – "Thus says the Lord..."

Which is where Hananiah, the other Prophet in our Old Testament reading comes in. Equally respected as a Prophet, regarded as a professional in the same way as any other official Prophet, including Jeremiah, speaking just as sincerely in the name of God, prefacing his public statements with the same formula "Thus says the Lord" – but with a very different message. Hence the business of the wooden yoke.

Jeremiah had been wandering around wearing a wooden yolk round his neck as a kind of non-verbal message to say "Accept the yoke of the

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Babylonians, since they are God's means of bringing you to your senses!". It was Hananiah, speaking and acting in the name of God, who took that wooden yolk off Jeremiah's shoulders – probably none too gently – and smashed it publicly, giving the message – "It's the Babylonians (Chaldeans) who are to be at the receiving end of God's wrath, not you. You are God's chosen people, and no matter how much you have turned against him I can promise you that his love is so much that he will personally defeat these enemies, restore your fortunes in about a couple of years and all will be well. Don't listen to this traitor and fight for the Lord against his enemies!"

Jeremiah apparently said nothing – but he went off and had an iron yolk made which he promptly put on his shoulders and carried on regardless.

Fascinating history, absorbing reading, if you can give the time to reading all 52 chapters and working out the sequence of events.

But what a dilemma. Two Prophets, each claiming to be the mouthpiece of the Lord, each respected, each saying "Thus says the Lord...", yet each proclaiming a very different message. And that's a dilemma which still faces us today, two and a half thousand years later.

How can we possibly decide who is presenting God's way when two or more well trained, prophetic voices speak with equal conviction and faith, yet present very different pictures of God's way, whether it be to do with same-sex marriages, abortion facilities, punishment of offenders, enforcement of rules and commandments or intervention to prevent violence against civilians in theatres of war. It's the same dilemma.

As a Christian, I have to say that however much prayerful thought and consideration I may give to such issues and the writings and teachings of those prophetic thinkers who pronounce on them, in the end I know of only one criterion that, as a Christian, I can use to decide who is truly representing God's way. Not "which view best represents popular thinking?" or "Which view is the more politically correct?" or "Which view is likely to lead to the greatest benefit for our society?"

No, for me, as a Christian, the only criterion has to be - does what is being presented, or does it not, coincide with the picture of the character

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of God I see in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, called the Christ, whom I believe to be God incarnate, God in human form, as I see him in the narrative of the Gospels which are the only source we have of his words and actions. If what is being put to me is what I would expect Jesus himself to have put before me, however much even that has, in the end, to be coloured by my personal interpretation, only then can I say in response to the formula “Thus says the Lord...” – This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.