

The Message of the Prophets #1

The nation turns away from God

Jeremiah 2:1-19
(Acts 7:51-54)
Matthew 23:23-39

So last week, we left the story of the People of God at a real high point – the reign of King David. We heard how he trusted God, and how under his leadership the Israelites came together under his rule, and lived according to the covenant they had made with God. We heard how he was far from perfect, but that he was humble enough to acknowledge his failings and to return to God in repentance when he had got things wrong.

And we heard God's promise that the kingdom of one of his descendants would be established for ever; and how that promise came to fruition in Jesus, our King.

But the problem with high points, as any hiker will tell you, is that at some point you begin to descend. And so it was with the People of God.

David's son Solomon succeeded him, and initially all went well. Solomon built the great temple as the permanent dwelling place for the Living God. He was wise, astute, entrepreneurial and became, over time, fabulously wealthy. But he married foreign wives, fell under their influence, became arrogant, and began to worship their gods. In short, he took his eyes off God. And the united people of God began to fracture.

In time, Solomon's son, Rehoboam, became king. He was arrogant and proud. There was rebellion, and the ten northern tribes broke away from the south, never to be reunited. The northern tribes became known as Israel. Over time they ceased to go to the southern kingdom of Judah to worship at the temple in Jerusalem, and set up their own centres of worship.

But in one respect, both kingdoms were the same – increasingly they were influenced by the surrounding culture. They took their eyes off the one True God and began to worship other 'gods' as well - the local fertility gods and goddesses. They offered sacrifices in 'the high places' to these 'Baals', images fashioned from wood and stone. They indulged in fertility rites involving shrine prostitutes. Some practised child sacrifice to appease their new-found deities.

And they lost sight of the true God's rules for living. The community that had been based on shared values of respect, justice and care for all, became a society increasingly based on wealth, personal prestige and power. The kings played power politics on the world stage, metaphorically getting into bed with Egypt, Assyria or Babylon, as advantage presented itself. The poor were left to survive as best they could, in a world in which personal integrity and even basic honesty held little sway.

And against this backdrop, God raised up prophets, to call his people back to him, back to the covenant they had made long years before. That they would be His people, worshipping and following Him and Him alone.

So let's hear now from one of those prophets – Jeremiah.

[Jeremiah 2:1-19]

As we've seen before, prophecy is not about predicting the future – it's about hearing and speaking out the word of God. The words of some prophets were recorded under their names and are included in our Bible, but there are plenty of prophets who don't have their own books. Moses was a prophet, so was Samuel, and so were Elijah and Elisha who lived and prophesied in the Northern Kingdom, and whose stories are told in the books of the Kings.

Some of the prophets have very distinctive styles of preaching God's message. Hosea, a prophet in the northern Kingdom, speaks of the Israelites' failure to keep the covenant in the terms of a faithless partner in a marriage – and of God's offer of forgiveness and restoration if only they will turn back to him.

But sadly, Hosea's preaching was to no avail. During his lifetime the northern Kingdom was overrun by the Assyrians and the people scattered. Over the course of time, the Assyrians repopulated the land with people drawn from other regions, and even sent back an Israelite priest as a kind of missionary. And out of this strange mixture the people known as Samaritans emerged, with a different way of worshipping the One True God. And I'm sure we know how they were regarded by the people of Judah in Jesus' day.

Micah, who was preaching in the southern kingdom of Judah at a similar time to Hosea, talks about true worship, and how that's not just about right rituals, but right attitudes and living in God's way.

*'With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings,
with calves a year old?....*

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

The words we heard from Jeremiah were also preached to the people of the Southern Kingdom – words of warning of the consequences of breaking the covenant. Jeremiah's style was very direct – he certainly doesn't pull any punches! And like many prophets he wasn't exactly popular. No-one – including those with power and wealth (and perhaps especially them) likes to hear bad news. He was persecuted, isolated, ridiculed, threatened and beaten, but he continued faithfully to convey God's message over many years, until finally

the southern kingdom too was defeated – this time by the emerging Babylonian empire, and its leaders and nobles, including Jeremiah taken off into exile in Babylon. And in that sense he fared better than the other great prophet we will be thinking about next week – Isaiah, who reputedly met his end being cut into two pieces with a saw.

Hmmm. Time for our Gospel reading....

[Matthew 23:23- 39]

So in this passage we meet another group of people who have lost sight of the One True God – but in completely different way from their ancestors.

In the case of the scribes and Pharisees, they have come to worship, not idols of stone and wood, but the Rules. They have made an idol out of the form of their religion, rather than seeking the God who gave them the rules for living in the first place.

And because they have lost sight of God, they have lost sight of the love, mercy, justice and peace within which these rules were meant to be applied. Laws that were supposed to underpin a vibrant, generous society living in the light of the One True God have become a heavy burden and tool of exclusion and control.

And Jesus is absolutely scathing in his criticism of the Pharisees and the scribes for what they are doing.

“You’re so obsessed with the rules’, he says, “that you measure out to the nth degree the amount of even the tiniest thing to make sure you give exactly 10% - no less **and no more**. Whilst your society is so corrupt that those among whom you live are struggling to survive. That’s not God’s idea of generosity.”

“All your outward show of piety and legalism is nothing more than a massive exercise in missing the point. You’re hooked on rules, rather than respect for others. On religion, rather than relationship.”

And he goes on to compare these religious leaders with those who killed the OT prophets – who killed those who bore the words of God.

Pointing forward to his own death, as the one who not only spoke, but was (and is) the Word of God.

So – enough history. How can these tales of shrine prostitutes and measuring out quantities of ground coriander possibly have any relevance to us? Let’s see.

Firstly, I think there is something here about the ease of being drawn away from what we know is God’s way. Of just how easy it is to take our eyes off God.

For Solomon, it was the influence of those around him. Those who were closest to him, who lived by different standards, worshipped other gods, and who made it seem “ok” not to worship or follow the One True God. And maybe an arrogance that he was so powerful that he could get away with it, could ‘manage’ just a little ‘dabble’ in practices that were not God-given.

For the leaders and peoples of the divided Kingdoms it was something similar. Everyone else was doing it – worshipping other Gods, playing power politics – why shouldn’t I? We can be a great nation, a place of prosperity. “God wants us to be prosperous”.

Er - really?

And what about us? And about our nation?

How easy is it for us to take our eyes off God? Generally it’s not because we are arrogant, like Solomon – though sometimes it can be. Sometimes we know exactly what is right (or wrong) but we prevaricate – “want to have our cake and eat it” as the saying goes, or put on an outward show whilst inside we’re not really living up to God’s way at all. Jesus had some strong words for the Pharisees and scribes about that.

Mostly we just get careless. Forget to be vigilant. Forget to keep coming back to God and measuring up our actions against his principles of love, justice and mercy. Measuring up our actions against What Would Jesus Do?

Keeping our eyes on God.

Secondly, I think there’s something here about being willing to stand out from the crowd. We don’t need to be a prophet like Jeremiah to stand up and speak out for what matters to God.

What are our God-inspired points of principle which we will speak, or act, to defend, even if it makes us, or our family and friends uncomfortable? Sexism? Racism? Homophobia? Lack of integrity? Lack of compassion? Putting profit before people? National self-interest before climate justice?

Speaking up, standing out.

And finally, and maybe the core of all this, is the question of *what*, or *who*, we put at the centre of our lives.

Sometimes it’s said that the question is not “do we worship?”, but “what, or who, do we worship?” Not all idols are made of wood or stone as they were in the ancient Middle East.

A football team? A celebrity?

Wealth? Power?
Security?
Family life?
Being thought well of? Respectability?
What we do?

And don't get me wrong. Some of those are good things in their own right. Football can be a joy (though rugby is better and cricket best of all imho). Marcus Rashford has used his celebrity status to make sure hungry children get fed. God gives us families to cherish and to be cherished by.

And so on.

The problems arise when these things are at the centre of our lives - the place that rightfully belongs to the One True God. Put God in the centre first, and everything else will fall into place. (And remember that Marcus Rashford and Raheem Sterling, the footballer who has done so much to tackle racism in his sport, are both committed and outspoken Christians.)

I was once invited to take a sheet of paper and write a list of what was important in my life. And then to take a second sheet of paper, draw a circle on it and write those things on it – with the more important ones in the middle – you get the idea. And I knew that God should be at the centre, but no matter how hard I tried, in all honesty, I couldn't place him there. Near – but not in the middle. It's an exercise I come back to time and time again in my mind. And it always, always leads to a prayer of confession.

Maybe you might like to try it for yourself?

So we've thought about a lot this morning
About keeping our eyes on God/not being drawn away
About standing up and speaking out
And about keeping God first and centre in our lives.

So before we rush on to the next part of the service, we're going to take a couple of minutes to reflect on what we've heard. We'll play some music to take the edge off the silence, but please just use this time to think on one or more of these things

Keeping our eyes on God
Standing up and speaking out
Keeping God first and centre in our lives.

