

'Called to radical discipleship'

Jeremiah 1:1-19

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

Intro

In the weeks ahead we will study the life, the words and the work of the prophet Jeremiah. For us here in Egypt, he is a special person, as he lived here for a while. Rumor has it that he was buried in Masr Qadiima, at the place where you can now find the Jewish Ben Ezra synagogue.

1 Life in times of stress

God called Jeremiah to be a prophet. I often meet with Christians who call *themselves* a prophet, or an apostle, or a pastor. It seems that many of us love those titles, and to be special...

Jeremiah was not happy at all to be special. He initially did not *want* to be a prophet - because it was so very difficult. The opening verses of the book of Jeremiah paint for us a brief picture of who Jeremiah was, and the problems he was facing.

In the first verses of the book of Jeremiah, we read that Jeremiah's father, Hilkiah, was a priest, and therefore Jeremiah was one as well. If you were born in the right family, you automatically qualified to the priesthood.

'And the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah...' You would think this was normal for priests, to know and hear the Word of God, but this was not so in the time of Jeremiah.

He describes that he served God in the time of king Josiah, under king Jehoiakim, and also under king Zedekiah. Those were famous kings of Israel; their names represent the spiritual state of the people of God.

The first king mentioned is king Josiah. We have read that the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah for the first time in the 13th year of Josiah. I assume that this means that what we have read in Jeremiah 1, happened in that 13th year of Josiah.

What was the state of the religious life at this time? We can read about this in 2 Kings 22 and 23, where we have a detailed description of the reformation under King Josiah. A reformation that occurred five years after Jeremiah was called by God - so during these first five years of Jeremiah's ministry, the life of the nation was still unreformed. By looking at the reforms of the King, we also understand how deep the people of God had fallen previously.

Five years after Jeremiah was called by God, King Josiah decided to begin some reconstruction work on the temple. We do not know why he decided to do so, but it was an excellent idea! Much more important, in this

process of reconstruction, the priests found the Book of the Law in the temple.

Israel had lost the Word of God? How is it possible that even in the House of God, those who lead and those who come to worship, do not know the Word of God anymore! How shameful. King Josiah was so upset after he had read the Word of God, that he called the leaders of the nation together.

Read 2 Kings 23:2-3

We then get a description of all things that Josiah did in order to serve God as a nation again.

- All the statues of Baal and Asherah, and all vessels used for the worship of these idols were removed from the temple of Israel. They had been inside God's temple!
- All priests who had been offering to the idols all around the country were fired.
- The houses of male prostitutes that were inside the temple of God were destroyed.
- all personal household gods, mediums, and other symbols of forbidden religions were done away.

Remember, God called Jeremiah 5 years before all these changes. At the time when God called him, paganism, and sin were rampant among the people of God! No wonder Jeremiah did not dance from joy when God asked him to speak out.

God did a miracle, and through king Josiah, there was a real reformation in the land. The house of God became a house of worship again - for the Lord our God alone. The book of Kings therefore describes King Josiah as a good man.

But after Josiah, one king after another disobeyed God. Jeremiah does not list them all at the beginning of his book, he only mentions Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, but read the stories in your bible and you see, the people of God were going down, ever deeper down.

Of each king after Josiah we read that he did evil in the eyes of God. And in the end, under King Zedekiah, Jerusalem was destroyed, the Temple of God was destroyed, and the people were taken as captives to Babylon. The horrible result of disobedience to God.

And Jeremiah, the prophet of God, lived to see it all. No wonder he is often called the weeping prophet. Jeremiah saw it all - the history of the people of God from reformation to deportation. From glory to the pit. From the rebuilding of the temple to its destruction.

2 Believer in the midst of all this

How can *we* serve God when we see problems, even in the midst of the House of God, in the heart of the Church? And if we see how enemies try to destroy the House of God?

It is tempting to just give up. It is attractive to throw the towel in the ring. We can cocoon in our homes, live our lives with our private religion, in our heart, but give up on the Church, and on the people of God. I imagine that for Jeremiah, these ideas were tempting. He was a priest, and he saw all the idolatry of his fellow priests; he saw the wickedness of the people everywhere. Was there no one left who wanted to truly serve God?

Jeremiah wanted to stay home, to keep his mouth shut, to not show anyone that he was a true servant of God – but God told him, in Jeremiah 1:17: ‘Get yourself ready, stand up and say to them whatever I command you.’ Do not give up! Straighten your back! Speak of your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ!

Not all of us are called to preach, or to be a prophet. God is not telling that we must all stand up in Church and be public speakers. But God does call us all to show stamina, to show inner strength, to stand for what we believe, to live for our God, both here in Church and in the face of a society that sometimes attacks Christians and the Church. He calls us all to live for him and to speak of him, in good times and in difficult moment.

And in order to do this, we can learn from Jeremiah. Because in the midst of his hard time, he did straighten his back – and he stood strong as a follower of the Lord his God.

We saw how God told Jeremiah that he had known him even before he was formed in his mother, and that he consecrated him, that is, set him apart, sanctified him, before he was born. He appointed him to obey God, even when he only existed in the mind of God before all times.

These words remind me of what St Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Rome. They had problems of division within their church and they were persecuted by the Romans. Problems inside and outside the Church. St Paul wrote:

Read Romans 8:28-32

In the midst of our problems, our Lord tells us that he is for us. He is for us, what can other people do to us? He graciously gives us all things!

‘Well’, Jeremiah replied to God, ‘thank you for informing me about my eternal election to be your servant, but Lord God! Look at me! I do not know what to say, and I am too young.’

But God went straight to the heart of the problem. ‘If I tell you to go, you go, and if I tell you to speak, you speak, but do not be afraid of them...’

God knows who you are, he knows your situation, he understand you and the problems in your life better than you do... Before you were even born, yes, before you were even formed as a fetus in your mother – he loved you and called you to be his child through our Lord Jesus Christ. And he called you to live fully for him.

Jeremiah saw the other priests in his nation; they served the idols of Baal and Asherah... He saw the kings who appointed these evil priests.... He saw how his nation had stopped worshipping God... He also saw how outside the land of God, Egypt and Assyria and Babylon became superpowers and that they would crush the people of God... Of course he was afraid!

Just as you are sometimes afraid when you are asked to show your Christians faith and your Christian life in your family, among your friends, in your job, among the people in the streets here in Cairo. We have enough reasons to be afraid. Will they laugh, will they mock us? Will they hurt us? Will it be bad for my job?

3 Promise of God and suffering

‘Do not be afraid.’ This is the commandment most often repeated in the Bible. Do not be afraid to really follow our Lord Jesus Christ. Do not be afraid that other people will notice that you are his servant. Do not be scared of the consequences, ‘for I am with you’, says the Lord.

And not only does our Lord say to Jeremiah that he must not fear, and that he, the Lord, will be with Jeremiah. He then also stretches out his hand to touch Jeremiah. Jeremiah physically felt the hand of God. How? We do not know. But Jeremiah felt it, and he knew: God is with me. Immanuel.

To Jeremiah and to you he promises in Jeremiah 1:19: ‘They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord.’

Is this a promise for an easy life? No certainly not. I was reminded of this when yesterday I read the story of the martyrdom of the great bishop Polycarp from the city of Smyrna, now Izmir, in Turkey. Long ago during a time of tribulation, the bishop, an old man, was arrested to be killed. Why? Simply – because he followed Jesus Christ.

Because bishop Polycarp was an old man, the Roman magistrate hoped to save his life. He pleaded that he would give up on following our Lord. ‘Are you not afraid to burn on the stake?’ Polycarp replied:

Eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me? [...] You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly.

So bishop Polycarp was burned at the stake. Good servants of God can suffer a difficult life, even a horrible end. King Josiah, he did what was good in the eyes of the Lord. In spite of this, his life ended in misery. He was killed. What happened?

The kings of Assyria and of Egypt were both trying to rule over the whole Middle East. Pharaoh Necho of Egypt marched his armies to the Euphrates River, to fight the king of Assyria. When pharaoh Necho and his armies were moving through the land of King Josiah, Josiah tried to stop the Egyptian armies, but they killed him as soon as they saw him. Crushed like a cockroach.

Jeremiah was at one time put in prison, and he was also taken as a prisoner to Egypt. And think of St Paul, who in Romans 8 said: 'If God is for us, who can be against us?' Paul himself was killed by the Romans. In the same chapter that we read from Paul also wrote:

Read Romans 8:35, 37-39

God's promise that he will guard us, is a promise that extends over death, into eternity. Being victorious is not having an easy life, but having a life with our Lord Jesus Christ – until the very end. This is what he is calling us to: a life with Jesus Christ, the Son of God; to follow him everywhere, all the time.

Of bishop Polycarp, who was burned by the Roman magistrate, we read that he was victorious in his death, because he held on to the faith. I read about him:

By his endurance he defeated the unrighteous magistrate and so received the crown of immortality; now he rejoices with the apostles and all the righteous, and glorifies the almighty God and Father, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ.

What a cloud of witnesses do we have around us; and Jeremiah is one of those. He is example for us of radical obedience - that is made possible because God never leaves us, and because his hand touches us.

Conclusion

Today God also very physically reaches out to you. His own Son became a real human being – God's arm to save. Through Jesus Christ, God stretches his hand out to you – to touch you.

Today he does that especially through the very physical touch of Holy Communion, of Eucharist. He is present in a very real way to touch you; to give you strength; to give you stamina for following him all the time.

When we celebrate, let us kneel and pray to our Lord: 'I want to follow my Lord. Help me to not be afraid'. And receive the bread and the wine as God's most personal touch. 'I am with you', God tells us through the body and blood of his Son Jesus Christ. 'Do not be afraid, but follow me.'

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; Amen.