

## Only?

There's a verse in this morning's Old Testament reading "'I chose you before I gave you life, and before you were born I selected you" or in other translations "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you", which can be quite scary. God knew us even before he gave us life, before we were born. God knows us better than anyone else. God knows what we are like, really like, on the inside.

God knows.

There are so many things that we think count against us. There are things that hold each one of us back. We remind ourselves of these things each week when we confess our sins – as we have done again this morning. All... fall short of the glory of God.

And that's true.

BUT.

But God's nature is always to have mercy. God's forgiveness is given freely in Jesus. He forgives all who turn to him in faith. Not because we earn that forgiveness, not because we "pay of our misdoings" by doing good deeds, not because we buy God's favour through putting lots of money in the offertory, and not because we devote ourselves penitential prayer and self-denial.

Even when we were far off, God sent his son to meet us, and to bring us home.

But even when we turn to faith in Jesus, we aren't "cured" of all that is wrong. We will be transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit within in and we will grow in the knowledge and love of God, but we won't be made perfect in this world. Though we look forward to the time when Jesus returns and makes all things new and as John tells us in the book of Revelation, ultimately Jesus will "...will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away." (Rev 21:4)

But in the meantime, we do our best as the people of God. We struggle. We cope. And we support each other.

But our doubts persist. Our thoughts, our opinions of ourselves, so often hold us back:

"It's too big a task"

"I'm too young"

"I'm too old"

"I'm only a recent Christian, I don't really know that much"

"I could never talk to non-Christians about Jesus"

"I couldn't pray out loud"

And not just doubts about ourselves as individuals, but as a group:

"There's too few of us"

"We're all old"

"We're too set in our ways"

“We need someone else to do that for us”

I think we’ve all had such doubts ... I certainly have.

And sometimes we project our doubts on others – “He wouldn’t want to do that because he’s too busy” or “That would be too much to ask” or “he gets depressed”.

I’m not saying that we need to put all these concerns out of our minds, and that we can achieve anything we want if we simply put our minds to it, or if we simply pray harder, or simply trust God more strongly.

Because if we go down that path, our failures become all the more catastrophic. We start thinking things like “we didn’t work hard enough”, or “we didn’t pray hard enough” or worse still, “Our faith wasn’t strong enough”. We blame ourselves and we feel even more guilty.

But the amount, or strength of our faith isn’t important. Jesus said (Matt 17, Luke 17) that faith as small as a mustard seed was sufficient. The amount and strength of faith isn’t important; what is important, is what our faith is in. Or more to the point, in whom we place our faith.

Faith doesn’t make our doubts about ourselves or others go away. But faith can show the way forward: a way to work around or worth with or work past our doubts.

God calls us, and we respond to him in faith. And we all have a role as part of the body of Christ, young and old, and male and female, and whether we’re shy or outgoing, or a talented musician or tone deaf, a skilled bookkeeper or couldn’t add 2 and 2 to save our life, and whatever our background and whatever our abilities – and whatever the strength of our faith.

God works through people. And not just through a few ‘prophets’ or ‘apostles’ or ‘saints’ or ministers or elders. But through each one of us, and through all of us. Flawed though we all are.

Today’s reading from the book of Jeremiah tells us of the call of Jeremiah to be a prophet.

That would have been a daunting thing. Whilst being a prophet – someone who speaks on behalf of God, someone who speaks the word of God – is a huge honour, we know from reading the Old Testament that the prophets themselves seldom had an easy time of it. People generally didn’t like to listen to prophets – and it seems that Jeremiah ended up having it worse than most.

The people just wouldn’t listen to him, no matter what he did, what he said, or how he said it. He told them that God was going to come down and punish them if they wouldn’t listen, but that didn’t do any good. They simply didn’t listen.

And there is a tendency of human behaviour that when we don’t like the message we are getting, that we take it out on the messenger. Things were no different for Jeremiah; He was repeatedly threatened. He was arrested and put into jail. They tried to kill him and when they failed to kill him, they had him exiled to Egypt.

Through it all, Jeremiah complained and cried out to God. And he moaned and groaned and he cried and he threatened to quit.

No one would do that in the modern church, would they?

And as we’ve heard this morning, when Jeremiah’s call first came, he told God that he couldn’t do the job, he didn’t have what it took, he wasn’t knowledgeable enough, he didn’t know the right people, he was too inexperienced, he didn’t know what he was doing. All summed up in verse 6

“Sovereign Lord, I don't know how to speak; I am too young.” or in other translations “I am only a child”.

I think that's something that many of us – if not all of us – can relate to. When asked to do something we respond by saying “I am too...” or “I am only...”. Whether it's too old, or only a child or only comfortable doing those things that we always do.

Even as he was being called, Jeremiah would have known that life as a prophet would not be easy. He would have known the reception that some of the other prophets got. He would have known that they had been hated and persecuted. And he knew that he didn't want that. Who would?

No one likes to be hated. No one likes to be persecuted.

But the story of the people of God is marked by hatred, persecution and opposition. And I'm not just talking about Old Testament times, or even the severe persecution that has happened under ISIS in recent times, think about the how frequently Christians and Christians views are ridiculed in modern society, and Christian views sidelined.

In New Testament times, the early church was persecuted – not least by Saul. And of course, think about Jesus. Even early in his ministry, he went back home to Nazareth where he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath as was his custom. He was the one chosen to read the Scripture that morning, so he took the Isaiah scroll and read “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

After that, he began to tell them some uncomfortable things about the sorts of people upon which God spread his grace. These people God would bless, he said, were outsiders, sinners, and foreigners. – and we heard the people's reaction in today's gospel reading: the ‘good and faithful’ people didn't like to hear that message, so they took Jesus outside the city and tried to throw him off a cliff.

So we shouldn't be surprised when things don't always go well or when people work against us. Even Jesus had trouble. Jesus experienced what Jeremiah experienced. Doing God's work, being a part of the body of Christ, can be a dangerous business. Answering the call to serve God often opens us up to the possibility of all sorts of abuse.

Sometimes the things Christians do breeds hostility and anger. People don't always understand our passion, our commitment, or our joy. They don't understand why we see the world differently. And when people don't understand, they often lash out.

And in the face of that, Christians often withdraw or retreat. The doubts set in again. *I can't stand up to that, I too weak, I am only a child.*

And if we try to rely on our own strength, in the face of the all the pressures of the world, we will fail.

Remember the old Sunday School song: Jesus loves me this I know, for the bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, we are weak but he is strong!”

We are weak, but he is strong.

When Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet. He was weak. He was inexperienced. He wasn't confident. He was too young. He was only a child.

But God still called him. And it wasn't a random choice, but the clear decision of God. He chose Jeremiah, and told Jeremiah in verse 5 "I Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,

before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations". God knew Jeremiah. He knew him intimately. His strengths, his weaknesses, his potential. God had chosen Jeremiah. To be his prophet – to speak his word.

And in response to that calling, Jeremiah tries to get God to change his mind "Alas, Sovereign Lord, [...] I do not know how to speak; I am too young." (1:6) And I'm sure that would be the reaction of any of us – Not a good choice, God, and this is why.... Why don't you try someone else?

But God's call wasn't to someone else. And today, God's call on our lives isn't to someone else either. God's call is to me. And to you. And to all of us as the church, as the body of Christ.

Jeremiah didn't know how to speak, and was only a child. But that wasn't an obstacle to God choosing him. God reassures Jeremiah in verse 7 and 8: But the Lord said to me, "But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord!"

To God, the fact that Jeremiah didn't know how to speak and was only a child, didn't matter. Because no matter what happened, God would be with him and would deliver him.

And while Jeremiah may not have known how to speak, that didn't matter because he wouldn't be speaking his own words, he wouldn't be relying on his own abilities as a speechwriter. Instead, as verse 9 tells us, "Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth."

Jeremiah wouldn't be speaking to the nations his own words, but he would be speaking God's word.

It is both an amazing responsibility and a daunting task. But the work to which Jeremiah was being called went even further, and God explained it to him "today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

Jeremiah, was only a child, but he was appointed over the nations and kingdoms. As the prophet of God, he had authority over all the people, kings and commoners alike. And not simply over the people of Israel, but over all nations.

Which is something we often miss when we read the Old Testament – we think that God's grace was extended to all people only in the New Testament, but we can trace God's grace being ultimately to all people all the way back to Genesis 12 where God makes his covenant with Abraham: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen 12:2-3).

In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

So Jeremiah was chosen by God and called to be a prophet not only to Israel but to all the world. To have authority over all nations and kingdoms. To have the power to uproot and pull down. To destroy and overthrow. And to build and to plant.

He was only a boy.

But God knew him.

And God was with him.

And God worked through him.

John the Baptist was only a man in the wilderness.

David was only a shepherd boy.

Mary was only a girl.

Andrew, Peter, James and John were only fishermen.

And so it goes throughout the bible, and throughout the history of the church.

God knew each one.

And God was with each one.

And God worked through each one.

And so too, God knows each one of us. And he has known us since before we were born. He loves us so much that he sent his only Son to save us. To die for us and to rise again.

God calls us to be part of the body of Christ, to be part of bringing about God's kingdom and sharing the good news of Jesus.

We may be too young, or too old.

We may be shy, or scared, or lack authority and confidence.

But God knows us, just as he knew Jeremiah.

And God is with us, just as he was with Jeremiah.

And God will work through us, just as he worked through Jeremiah.

None of us would be here this morning if it were not for the grace and mercy of God which has been with us in the tough times. We are here today, not because we are strong, but because God is strong.

That is the word that Jeremiah learned. That is the truth that Jesus taught. And that is the faith that keeps us still standing. "Do not be afraid...for I am with you."

Amen.