

Hope

Jeremiah 33:14-16

How are things for you?

On a scale of 1 to 10, with one being bad and ten being fantastic, how would you rate things? How does that compare to yesterday... or last week... or this time last year?

This is not an answer our loud question, and neither are there right or wrong answers, but think about it.

And given that we're nearing the end of the calendar year, how are you feeling about next year? And for that matter, this time last year, how were you feeling about 2024? Has 2024 lived up to all you hoped for? Has it been as bad as you dreaded?

Do you feel that your life has been overtaken by circumstances bigger and more powerful than you?

Do you feel powerless in the face of the problems around you?

Do you ever feel like you're not in the right place? That you just don't fit in, wherever you might find yourself?

Have you ever wished for the good old days and the way things used to be? Do you sometimes just want to go "home"? Are you waiting for things to change or something to happen but not even sure what it is you're waiting for?

I think we all feel those sort of feelings at least sometimes, and some feel them more than others. Sometimes those feelings manifest as "just" statements – if I can just get through this exam, if I can just get through this crisis, if I can just get through Christmas. If we can "just" get through something, then everything will be okay... except things don't generally work out that way.

The people to whom Jeremiah was writing in today's Old Testament reading were like us. Things weren't right. Things hadn't gone right. The Babylonian army had conquered Jerusalem. Many of the nation of Israel had been deported, and the remainder found themselves living in an occupied land. And Jeremiah the prophet was in prison. It was a time of uncertainty and fear.

Throughout the book of Jeremiah, we see God expressing frustration and disappointment with the chosen people because they had wandered away from the covenant relationship that had existed since in the time of Moses. You know, when God said "I will be your God, and you will be my people"? It was a relationship which God had called his people into, out of his love, and which only required their love in return.

And the people were to show their love through living in relationship with God and with each other. Through keeping God's commandments. Not because keeping those commandments would earn them God's favour, but keeping those commandments because they had already received God's favour.

They should have been loving to God and each other, because God had been loving to them.

And they had turned away.

Way back in Chapter 7, Jeremiah told them plainly: “The Lord sent me to the gate of the Temple where the people of Judah went in to worship. He told me to stand there and announce what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, had to say to them: “Change the way you are living and the things you are doing, and I will let you go on living here. Stop believing those deceitful words, ‘We are safe! This is the Lord's Temple, this is the Lord's Temple, this is the Lord's Temple!’

“Change the way you are living and stop doing the things you are doing. Be fair in your treatment of one another. Stop taking advantage of aliens, orphans, and widows. Stop killing innocent people in this land. Stop worshiping other gods, for that will destroy you. If you change, I will let you go on living here in the land which I gave your ancestors as a permanent possession.” (7:1-7 GNT)

But despite Jeremiah’s warning, the people didn’t change their ways. In fact, they had a bet each way – they continued to worship Baal, the traditional god of the Caananites who was the god of crops, livestock and fertility. So they worshiped God at the Temple in Jerusalem, and then they went out to the hills and made sacrifices to Baal.

It was hardly them ‘trusting God’ was it?

Remember though that God wasn’t asking anything of the people that wasn’t good: Be fair, be honest, don’t take advantage of the weak, don’t kill innocent people. All good things.

And yet, the people didn’t respond.

And so, as the book of Jeremiah continues, we see God’s frustration with his chosen people growing. In chapter 12, God says “I loved my people and chose them as my very own. But now I will reject them and hand them over to their enemies. My people have turned against me and roar at me like lions.” (12:7-8)

And in Chapter 15, Jeremiah sets out the consequences of the people turning against God

“I will punish you in four different ways: [1] You will be killed in war and [2] your bodies dragged off by dogs, [3] your flesh will be eaten by birds, and [3] your bones will be chewed on by wild animals. My people, you abandoned me and walked away. I am tired of showing mercy; that's why I'll destroy you by scattering you like straw blown by the wind. I will punish you with sorrow and death, because you refuse to change your ways. There will be more widows in Judah than grains of sand on a beach.” (15:3,6-8a)

It is disturbing stuff. But the consequences of turning away from God are always disturbing.

These weren't idle threats: By Chapter 30, God's warnings to the people had become reality. Babylon had invaded, the Temple had been destroyed, and the survivors were taken into exile. But then God's message delivered by Jeremiah changed from one of warning and punishment and retribution, to one of hope.

And our reading today, those three verses from the middle of Chapter 33, give us that hope, they prophesy the hope that God was giving his people. It wasn't a new hope, but it was a reminder of the hope that the people already had, even if they didn't grasp it or respond to it – or I guess, even remember it.

“‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.’” (14)

We can trace that good promise right back to the beginning – to Genesis 3, when people first turned against God – but also when God first promised to save the people.

God renewed that promise again and again, to Abraham later in Genesis, and to the whole nation by the prophets Isaiah and Micah. In fact, one of our traditional Christmas readings - one that you're probably familiar with - from Isaiah 11, says this:

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord— and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.” (Is 11:1-3)

And that message matches the message we have in today's reading from Jeremiah: “‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land.’”

When Jeremiah first gave this prophecy, his listeners didn't know when those days would be or what that time would be – but they heard that a righteous branch would sprout from David's line. Today, we can look back and see that those days were over 2000 years ago, on that first Christmas morning, but we still wait – we wait for the fulfilment which began on that Christmas morning. The return of Jesus.

When Jeremiah delivered his prophecy, it was a dark time for the people of God: the land invaded, the Temple destroyed, the people taken into exile. But Jeremiah delivered to them a message of hope.

And we might not have been invaded or taken to exile but we look around and we see dark times. We see war and conflict. Anger and despair.

As we heard in the gospel reading, “‘On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken’” (Luke 21:25b-26)

People are apprehensive or scared. They're angry. So many people in the world are in dire circumstances. Our problems may not be so bad, but we all struggle at least some of the time.

But to us, just like the people of ancient Israel, Jeremiah delivers a message of hope:

'In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.

This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.'

Notice it's not a message about vanquishing enemies or being victorious, the message is about being saved and living in safety.

“The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.” As we begin a new Church Year, on this first Sunday of Advent, even as we count down to Christmas, we should look beyond that and be waiting, watching, yearning, and hoping for our saviour's return; for renewed life; for a new beginning; for justice and love; peace and joy among all peoples. We have received a hope that is real; even in the midst of all the problems of the world and our lives.

Whether it's the people of Judah and Jerusalem occupied by the Babylonians; whether it's the troubled spots in the world today; whether it's the poor, homeless of our city, the impoverished and oppressed people of the world, the refugees, the victims of natural disasters or human greed; know that the days are surely coming when a Saviour will appear: the righteous Branch from David's line.

As we remember the events of that first Christmas when Jesus was born, we need remember too that he grew up and lived amongst us; taught and preached among us; worked miracles among us; faced cruel suffering and met a criminal's death at the hands of the corrupt and the powerful; was raised from death three days later; has promised to live with us and through us until the end of time; and will one day bring about the new heavens and the new earth.

Such is our hope: yesterday, today, and forever.

No matter how dark things are, how bad the world might seem, this is still God's world, which God loves. Loves so much he sent his Son into the world to save it.

He is in control. This is our message of hope to and for a suffering, hopeless world. The world needs a Saviour, as much now as ever. Don't give up, for in those days we will be saved, and we will live in safety.

So this Advent we live, wait and we hope for the days that are surely coming.

Amen.