

2021-06-27 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Revd Sam Johnson

Jeremiah 11: 1-14; Romans 13: 1-10

I don't like pizza!

Are you paying attention?

Anyway – on to today's reading ...

Jeremiah has been speaking to the people of Jerusalem, he says to them: listen carefully, heed the words of the covenant, listen to God's voice so that: **'you will be my people and I will be your God.'** (verse 4)

I have three lovely children, but sometimes it's like they've gone deaf, I ask them to do something, and they don't or I tell them not to do something and they do it! It's one of the universal experiences of parenthood (or so I'm told)!

It's also very frustrating!

I feel that here I am helping out and trying to teach them about this world, but they would rather not listen, or maybe they are doing it to annoy me? Or I don't know ...

So Jeremiah's people haven't been listening. They've been ignoring the carefully thought out and lovingly given plans of God. A loving covenant, a promise, ignored ... I wonder if this is frustrating to God!

He just sees the people heading back to other gods, worshiping other things and it's like he's given up at this point. I'm not going to listen any more, I won't listen even if they are in trouble.

Doesn't sound very loving, does it? Doesn't sound very God-like? Is God really going to ignore us when we call to him in times of trouble just because we didn't listen to him before?

Well, no, and yes, and maybe.

What on earth do you mean by this Sam? Is God not going to pay attention to us and help us when we are in trouble just because we've done something wrong? Is this the end then? Are we lost? Are we doomed to a life of loneliness and trouble, with a distant and far-off God who has turned his back on us?

Well, don't panic. That's not my sermon, that's not this talk, also that's not what God is doing today.

You see you could say God was getting frustrated by turning his back here ... but actually God not hearing them, not listening to them, is that actually they are using God as a kind of "divine vending machine" push a button when you need a prayer answering, do what you like otherwise.

That's not how God works – you can't just turn to him and expect him to answer your prayer and then not care the rest of the time. God cares, all the time. He cares how we live our lives, what we choose to do and how we spend our time, all the time.

The people Jeremiah was talking to had forgotten this.

We've talked before how the people had turned away from God, had tried to make up their own mind on what to do and were trying to put God into a little box. They had made up their own rules, had made up their own gods, and basically ignored their part of the covenant ...

God is saying – actually that's not how I want things to be with you – pay attention, stop ignoring me!

Paul, in our second reading, is also talking about the importance of paying attention. He speaks of governing authorities ... authorities that we should pay attention to.

Quite a few people find this passage tricky, especially when the governing authorities seem to be corrupt, or evil, or set rules that they themselves don't keep – Matt Hancock has shown us over the last week that surely authorities aren't to be trusted anymore, right?

Well, actually Paul is writing to say that God has established these authorities, like it or not. Not that it makes **PTO**

them good, but that God is working through these people in a way that we aren't expecting, through people we aren't expecting in a way that is **good**. And by simply rebelling against these, we might miss what God is really doing.

Perhaps there is punishment or judgement God is bringing about through these people that we aren't expecting.

There can still be good. To obey the government is to obey God?

So does that mean we just blindly submit to authority? That we just let things pass by unnoticed?

I don't think so, and I don't think that this is what this means either – you can protest against evil, speak out and advocate for the forgotten that brings about effective change through positivity just as much as negativity, through peaceful protest just as much as violent rioting ...

Speaking truth to power, being prophetic isn't about rebellion, but about justice. It's about going through the correct channels to bring about change.

However - When there is conflict between a ruling authority and Scripture, that's when we must choose God, Scripture first. Don't make the mistake like the people in Jeremiah, heading off to idolatry rather than obeying God.

Pay attention to authority, not out of duty, but out of conscience, writes Paul. Then the theme shifts slightly:

Pay taxes, give what is owed, but give respect, give honour where it is due.

Let no debt remain except the debt of love.

Love!

Love is the fulfilment of the law. Pay attention to the law – the law is fulfilled in love. Paul is reminding people of love. The love of God that led to the death and resurrection of Jesus that forgives us our wanderings, forgives us our “vending machine” attitude and forgetful mentality.

The promise of God ... in the new promise through Jesus there is forgiveness from our forgetting, from our lack of attention, from our chasing after anything and everything else but God ... He forgives us our sin and lets us start afresh once again.

So does that mean that because of this we are free to do what we like?

No, quite clearly this passage says from freedom, choose to submit to authority, from freedom choose to pay taxes – yes even those.

From freedom pay revenue ... from freedom give respect ... from freedom give honour ... from freedom, love ...

Don't get re-bound into debt for something – keep yourself free ... It echoes that call to turn back to God, to continue in that debt of love to God, to one another.

It asks us to pay attention to our fellow humans, those walking and working in this world with us.

To remember that they too are loved and cared for, known by God, they too are people whom God has a plan and a purpose for. They too are people whom God is calling to turn back to him.

So if you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember to pay attention ...

To pay attention to God ...

to those around us ...

to see where God is at work in unexpected ways and in unexpected places!

Amen.