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Today we embark on a journey. Jeremiah is a book in the Old Testament that many of us have probably never read as part of a study. It is a book that was written about 2,600 years ago. Now this is where we in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century hear this and suddenly think, "what under the sun do the writings of an ancient old prophet have to do with me?" It would be a big mistake to think along those lines. We are happy to read the New Testament and take all it has to say on board – its 2000 years or so old, Jeremiah was just 600 years earlier!

One of the traps Christians can fall into is to believe that we are simply New Testament believers and that the Old Testament is a wonderful book of nice stories but what really matters is the New Testament. It would be a mistake to think along those lines too! I have a good friend who lectures in Belfast Bible College who years ago told me that I should read the Bible in stereo. In other words as we read the New or Old Testament it should always be either listening forward or backward to what the other testament has to say. Another way of putting it is to read the New Testament through the window of the Old Testament. You cannot separate the two Testaments as they are the combined written revelation of God and one exists because of the other.

Jeremiah's themes in this 52 chapter chronicle although written at a particular point in history with reference to a particular situation have massive relevance to us today. The ripples of this prophecy have not stopped. The world today is as confusing and uncertain as ever. Many people live in fear of a global holocaust. The Third World, and particularly Africa, faces political and socio-economic instability for many years to come. In addition, it is becoming the arena for super-power struggles. There are ideological claims and counter-claims. The world is swamped with different religions.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey controversially claimed that the coronation of the Prince of Wales must be an "interfaith" event, according to a television interview. Carey claimed that the next coronation needs "very significant changes" so that it is "inclusive" of other religions that have spread across Britain He said: *"The Queen came to the throne at a time when the Church of England was really the only Christian faith in the country. "And there were no Muslims, Sikhs or Hindus around to be in any way evident in the life of the country. Now it's a completely different world, so the coronation oath would have to be looked at more critically. "It's got to be a much more interfaith coronation service next time around. Prince Charles put his finger on it and there's no way in which the sovereign can be defender of one faith. Although I hope that the next coronation will say very firmly that Christianity is still the dominant faith of the United Kingdom... it's got to be a much more inclusive character."*

Today the question that is being asked is, "which is the right religion, or church? Can different religions be practised at different times for convenience? Who is the real God? How may he be known, and what should be our relationship with him? What are the consequences of wrong attitudes towards God and our fellow human beings? These are pressing questions. But they are not just for today...

As I said the prophet Jeremiah lived about 2,600 years ago in the kingdom of Judah. What many people don't realise is that long after the children of Israel arrived in the promised land there was a setting up of two kingdoms. One in the North, Israel and one in the south Judah. The Southern Kingdom consisted of 2 tribes (Judah and Benjamin). The kingdom extended in the north as far as Bethel, while in the south it ended in the dry area known as the Negev. Its eastern and western boundaries were the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Judah was left suddenly independent when King Rehoboam flatly refused to lighten the heavy load of forced labor and high taxation imposed on the Israelites by his father Solomon (1 Kin. 12:1-24). Upon Rehoboam's refusal, the ten tribes living north of Bethel promptly declared their independence. Jerusalem the capital of Judah was very close to the border of the two and was by far the largest city in the region, as indeed it still is today. Jeremiah was born into a priestly family, and he was called by God to become a prophet in 626BC when he was about twenty years old. This book records his career. The God of Jeremiah is the God who establishes and faithfully keeps his covenant with his chosen people.

What is a covenant, well it is a special agreement that God makes with his people so that people can really know him and give their lives to him in proper obedience and is dependant on both sides keeping their side of the agreement. But the Israelites have broken the terms of this agreement many, many times. Even so, God promises to establish 'a new covenant'. We read in the Bible that he will put his Law within 'them and 'write' it upon their hearts. They will all know him and he will forgive their sins, wiping them all away. The promise of the 'new covenant' is at the very centre of the message of Jeremiah. Knowing God in this new way makes all the difference between the true and faithful God, and all other gods and ideologies. The New Testament states that this new covenant was established through what Jesus Christ did when he died on the cross. So although Jeremiah speaks of this covenant it takes up to 600 or so years for God to put it in place through Jesus. This is something that occasionally causes friction in our understanding of God. God acts when God feels it is right to act. Usually a time when he will receive most Glory and when it is in our greatest interest.

Our biggest problem is, as I mentioned last week, is that we live in a world where it is instant this and instant that. We have instant coffee and custard, we have royal mail special delivery that will have parcels delivered in the UK before 9am the next day, One hour photo is now too long for some people and the idea of having to queue for anything is quickly becoming something we will not tolerate. We hate to be caught in a traffic jam not necessarily because we are in a hurry somewhere but simply because we are being forced to wait. God today still asks us to wait and sadly many today are not prepared to be as patient with God as they could be. Peter in his letter towards the end of the New Testament writes:

“<sup>8</sup>But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. <sup>9</sup>The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

God is God and we need to allow him to be himself and not be tempted turn him into a 21<sup>st</sup> Century vending machine that on the press of a button gives us our every desire and doesn't waste time in doing so! In Jeremiah's time, this God of the covenant is unique, living and everlasting, unlike the wooden idols of the other nations. He is the creator and the sovereign ruler of the whole universe. He is utterly limitless - being both 'at hand' and also 'far off'. People cannot hide themselves from him. He fills both the heavens and the

earth. This all-knowing, all-seeing God who searches the hearts of every individual. His love is everlasting, but at the same time he is just and must judge. This God can be encountered if only people would seek him whole-heartedly. True guidance, which so many people seek, is offered by the God of the covenant through his 'Law' and through 'the words of my servants the prophets'. In Jeremiah's time the Law was something near our first five books of the Bible. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Through Jeremiah, God tells his people that if they 'call' upon him and pray to him whole-heartedly, he is ready to answer and disclose to them 'great and hidden things'.

In his covenant, God has the power to heal and restore individuals and whole nations. So Jeremiah could pray:

'Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for you are the one I praise' (17:14).

The healing and salvation offered by God has a broad effect in physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, economic and even political terms. Health and healing will be part of the blessings of the new covenant. But at the time of Jeremiah, the condition of God's people was incurable - beyond healing. So, what had gone wrong? They had forsaken their God and begun to serve other gods (2:13)

"My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

They were mixing the worship of God with the worship of other gods. They burned incense to the Canaanite god, Baal, and went after other gods. Then they would go into God's temple and say: 'We are safe!' Their disloyalty towards God and their divided interests led to their abandoning their faith, in utter rebellion against God. Religious disloyalty because of fear, pressure or serious crises is a deep-seated problem among the African people. Many are baptized, confirmed and bear 'Christian' names but later turn away to serve the ancestors and other nature deities. They break their covenant with God. But listen friends we do it too! On Sunday morning we gather into Gods' house to worship him and then the rest of the week we fall in behind the world and all the other gods out there. We turn on our televisions and worship the god of consumerism allowing the adverts to wash over us and affect the way we spend our money. Or the god of materialism when we tell ourselves, "well I will be happy if I can just get one more of this or that, or the latest upgrade or the latest fashion..." Retail therapy has for a lot of people replaced the potential of a quiet time with God, reading his promises and trusting him for our welfare. Then when the weekend comes along we return into God's house and tell ourselves we are safe because it is God's house. This is not right. We cannot worship both God and... you fill in the gap as is appropriate in your life.

The bible tells us that our God is a jealous God. If he is prepared to make a covenant with us, his faithfulness causes him to be jealous in a positive way not in the way we understand jealousy. He will not share his people with other gods. We cannot be part time followers of God and expect to be with us full time... Jeremiah says this is wrong. The moral and social evils in Jeremiah's nation were an inevitable result of disloyalty to God. These included oppression, violence, wickedness, sexual immorality, murder, falsehood, theft, and so on. The consequence, which Jeremiah foresaw, would be exile, physical removal from their country. They would be dispersed among other peoples by their invaders and conquerors. Before this, there would be famine, pestilence, drought and war.

Jeremiah's era was one of the most turbulent in the history of his people. Within forty years as a prophet, he witnessed the reign of Judah's last five kings and a governor. On the foreign scene, Assyria, way to the north, was eventually destroyed by the rising power of Babylon out to the East in 612Bc. Meanwhile, Egypt in the south was challenging the military might of Babylon and Judah and the surrounding small nations were seeking their place in these super-power struggles. At times the kings of Judah pledged loyalty to Babylon; other times, they were drawn into the Egyptian camp. Jeremiah's unpopular message remained the same - Babylon would gain supremacy, and any nation that would not yield to Babylon would suffer famine, disease, invasion and eventual deportation to that country!

Jeremiah's message naturally drew very sharp reactions - both from the ruling class, including prophets and priests, and from the ordinary people. Many times his life was threatened - and once he was left for dead in an underground well. The scroll on which his words were written was destroyed by King Jehoiakim, and had to be rewritten. In his sufferings, Jeremiah prayed, wept, was filled with self-pity, accused God of deceiving him and called for vengeance upon his tormentors. But Jeremiah's faith in God never diminished, nor did he compromise his message. Though he was apparently restrained from praying for his people, he continued to do so (14:7-12). Jeremiah's faithfulness and consistency are at the heart of his message. The prophetic voice, even if unpopular, should not be silenced on sensitive national issues and foreign policy options. In all his troubles, Jeremiah was delivered from death, and he lived to see his predictions come true. But Jeremiah still had hope for his people. Though the Babylonian captivity would last about seventy years, they would return to their land. Babylon itself and other nations of the earth would be punished.

Jeremiah also looked far beyond Judah's return - to the time of the 'messiah', a time of peace and economic prosperity. Jerusalem shall be holy and its inhabitants shall return to God whole-heartedly. Gentile nations shall also share in the blessings. With the coming of Jesus Christ these blessings are already being realized. The message of Jeremiah is of universal and eternal relevance. It is my desire that as we spend time together on Sunday mornings we might more fully come to understand this God of the Old Testament who spoke through this prophet Jeremiah. A God who made a new covenant with his people that if they turned from other gods and worshipped him only that he would be their God eternally, that he would forgive their sins and heal their land. A God who today holds out that same covenant promise seen in the person of Jesus Christ, his son. That if we come to Jesus, understand and accept what Jesus has done for us on the cross. If we admit to ourselves that we are sinners, that we don't do the things we know God wants us to do and that we are living a life outside of the life we know we should be living. If today we turn to God, or in some cases return to God he will forgive us and be our God and we can call ourselves children of God. This, if you remember, was the meaning of the word repent during our 40 days of purpose, a turning away from the way we are going at present to walk the road God has prepared for us. As we travel through some of the main themes of Jeremiah this will recur time and time again. Wouldn't it be great at the very start of this series to get things sorted out with God and to know his blessing and his presence with us on a daily basis?