

NOT USED

‘For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt’ *Jer 8:21*

So spoke the prophet Jeremiah as he watched the growing crisis in the city of Jerusalem in the period leading up to and following the fall of the city of Jerusalem and the beginning of the Exile in Babylon. There is an energy, something of a personal passion to the message of Jeremiah. He is, among all the prophets, the one who, as he delivers his message, reveals something of his own personality. We read his great prophetic utterances as, in God’s name, he denounces the faithlessness of God’s people, their willingness to run after any god except the God who had redeemed them. But even as he does so we get an insight into something of his own personal anguish.

For, intertwined with his own faithfulness to the word that he felt God had given him, there is a close identification with the pain of his people. Jeremiah’s own agony over his people, mingles with that of God himself. Even after his message has been rejected, he continues to long for the conversion of the nation. After the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonians offered him a safe passage to settle wherever he wished; He refused, choosing instead to stay with the people still in the land until he is finally brought to Egypt against his will where he will die in exile.

The words ‘For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt’ were primarily written out of Jeremiah’s own pain, they give us a glimpse into the heart of God himself. We worship a God who is personal, a God who is not aloof or indifferent to our pain. There is something of the pain of a parent watching a

child bearing the consequences of their mistakes, their rejection of advice. There is a sense in which this hurts God more than it hurts God's people.

In these utterances of Jeremiah and the prophets we get a fusion of God's judgement and God's love. From our own perspective we tend to see these aspects of God as mutually exclusive – but then I ask myself, which parent correcting or chastening a child does not at the same time love that same child. the chastening is part of the outworking of the parent's love. We see something of this same parental 'love-in-judgement' later on in Jeremiah as God declares through the prophet:

²⁰ Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he the child I delight in?
As often as I speak against him,
I still remember him.
Therefore I am deeply moved for him;
I will surely have mercy on him,
says the LORD. *Jer 31:20*

What we call anger is nothing less than a rejected love that refuses to let go of the object of that love.

This is a redemptive strand that runs through the whole of the biblical story as, again and again, God makes a new beginning with his people.

In Genesis, disobedience leads to the catastrophe of the Flood – out of which Noah is preserved to enable a new start.

Redemption from Egypt is followed by disobedience at Sinai – but a chastened people is still lead into the Promised Land.

The period of the Judges is punctuated by episodes of ‘Israel doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord’, followed by judgement, followed by a new start under a new leader.

Then, in the time of Jeremiah, the catastrophe of the Fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple and the Exile will in turn give way to the people’s return during the reign of Cyrus and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

Judgement comes on each occasion, not as the result of a capricious act of a vengeful God, but rather as the inevitable consequence of a people’s disobedience which goes to the very heart of God, but does not extinguish his purposes of redemption.

As Isaiah declared:

¹⁵ Can a woman forget her nursing child,
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?

Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.

¹⁶ See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are continually before me.

¹⁷ Your builders outdo your destroyers,
and those who laid you waste go away from you. *Is 49:15-17*

This of course reaches its climax in the Incarnation, in the coming of Jesus. In him we encounter the living God; in him God takes upon himself our human nature. In him we find a living expression of the words of Psalm 85:10

Mercy and truth are met together, ♦
righteousness and peace have kissed each other;

All this comes together in the Cross of Christ. In that same Cross, the God of new beginnings, the God who never gives up on his people, invites to live for him in whatever situation he has placed us.

