

THE TEMPLE

JEREMIAH 7.1-7

Isaiah and Jeremiah Series

OPENING PRAYER

God of all peoples and all times, God with us here and now, open us up to your wisdom, and to the wisdom of each other. Bless us with honesty and compassion, that we may grow in faith, hope and love for the sake of your justice and peace on earth. Amen.

EXEGESIS

The Book of Jeremiah is concerned with the people of Judah in the late 600s, early 500s BC and their defeat at the hands of the Babylonian Empire, which took many of the Jerusalem elite into exile. While the prophet Jeremiah is seen to prophesy against other nations, including Egypt and Babylonia, much of his prophetic criticism is directed against the Jerusalem elite itself.

In this passage, we witness Jeremiah being called by God to 'stand in the gate of the Lord's house' (verse 2) – in other words, to make his prophetic proclamation publicly and directly in confrontation with the institution in question: The Temple. God's word, through Jeremiah, exposes the deception of words which are easily said, but which are basically hollow: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.' In fact, the unthinking repetition of these words seems to be an obstacle to God's dwelling with his people in this place.

The story that the Temple tells itself, about who it is and its status, is effectively a lie. After all, if the Temple truly acted as though it was God's temple, it would not oppress the alien (the foreigner), the orphan or the widow. But the truth is: this institution is wrapped up with a system of injustice – and the consequence of this mismatch between the words and the reality is two-fold: first, God does not 'dwell' with this institution- God has in fact distanced himself from it- and secondly, as the prophetic book unfolds, we see that the fall of Judah is understood as a judgment on the Jerusalem elite for its failure to walk in the ways of God's justice.

So, Jeremiah speaks in the public realm: 'If you truly amend your ways; if you act justly one with another, God will dwell with you ... for ever and ever.'

REFLECTION

Learning to escape group-think: a mission in 'xenophilia'! (love of strangeness)

A contemporary British theologian, Andrew Shanks, suggests human beings are inclined to succumb to three kinds of 'dishonesty' (<http://bit.ly/2stSEru>). One type of dishonesty is the 'herd mentality', where a group lazily accepts its own 'group-think', going with the flow of what

feels familiar, as though its own story can capture the essence of what is true. The Temple, in Jeremiah's day, could be seen to be doing this- convincing itself that it was indeed 'the Temple of the Lord', whilst manifestly living by a different truth: indifferent to the plight of many of God's people.

In the same way, we can say this about all sorts of institutions- not least religious ones- in our own day: it is all too easy to accept our own narrative, and to close down conversation between us and those whose story might tell a different truth. Jeremiah's challenge is not only to notice those who suffer, but to let our 'group-think' be exposed for its dishonesty. Let 'the alien', the stranger, the 'xenos' in xeno-phobia, and those dehumanised by the system, no longer be feared or held at bay, but may they be loved with all their strangeness, and be listened to, so that their story shakes our own delusions and opens us up to the fullness of truth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) In which ways can churches today be inclined towards certain kinds of 'herd mentality', accepting our own group-think without question?
- (2) The Church has different 'herds' within itself – conservative, liberal, Catholic, Protestant, so how might the Church express 'xenophilia' (love of strangeness) in its own internal life?
- (3) What might it look like to be a church-of-xenophiles in missionary engagement with people of other religious traditions, to be shaken out of a 'herd mentality' through hospitality towards the stranger?

CLOSING PRAYER

Living God, illuminate the way we think, the story we tell ourselves, the truths we assume, so we may break out of what confines us and be hospitable to the stranger.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Shanks, A., (2005) Faith in Honesty, Aldershot: Ashgate