

JEREMIAH, ON THE WHEEL

Vital Optimism

The Rabbi's called him the weeping prophet! Michelangelo painted him this way on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.



Michelangelo makes him look like a figure of despair – and maybe in some ways he was. But, perhaps, in other ways he was anything but.

The story of Jeremiah begins this way.

Jeremiah 1

1 The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. **2** The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, **3** and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile. (Jeremiah 1 v 1-3)

The book of Jeremiah begins with a name! The name is Jeremiah! And following the name Jeremiah, is a list of names that put the name Jeremiah into context: Hilkiyah, Benjamin, Josiah, Amon, Judah, Jehoiakim, Zedekiah. The book of Jeremiah does not open with a description of the scenery, or a description of the culture, or a brief history of a nation, but with a list of personal names.

A name recognises that I am a person – not a thing, an object, a statistic... but a person. Jeremiah was a real person just like you and me. And that's really, really important!

A name recognises that I am me and not you. When we are born, we are given a name, not a number, and through our name we are recognised as a unique person.

When he was born, Hilkiah (his father) and his wife (Jeremiah's mother) gave him the name Jeremiah. In biblical times names were often given for their meanings. The meaning of the name Jeremiah is not certain. It may mean 'The Lord exalts' or it may mean, 'The Lord hurls.'

A couple of interesting things to note here with the name Jeremiah. In both possible meanings of the name, is the name of God. Sometimes in the bible the parents of a child are told by God what name to give their child. So, Mary and Joseph were both told that the son born to them should be given the name Jesus, because it means Saviour. We are not told if Hilkiah and his wife were told to name the son born to them, Jeremiah. We are not told if Hilkiah and his wife had any idea of the call which God would place on the life of their son. We have no idea if they understood what would happen to their son if he accepted a call from God. But maybe the name they gave to their son was given to him in hope.

Perhaps they gave the name Jeremiah to their son in anticipation of what God might do in his life and through his life. Perhaps they gave him the name Jeremiah in the hope that through his life the Lord would be lifted up or exalted: Jeremiah – The Lord is exalted. Or perhaps they gave him the name Jeremiah in the hope that God would use him to challenge his people out of their selfishness: The Lord hurls!

Either way, perhaps their hope was that with God's name in his name, God and Jeremiah would act together in his life: that the life of God would in some way find expression in his life.

In Israel, most names contained the name of God! Perhaps in that way the names of the people of God are always full of hope. But, if we look at the other names in the list at the beginning of the book of Jeremiah, we are confronted with a significant and profound challenge. All the names in the list contain the name of God: Josiah: God heals, Jehoiakim: The Lord raises up, Zedekiah: The Lord is righteous, Jeremiah: The Lord exalts or the Lord hurls.

Maybe, probably, those names are expectant with hope. Maybe, probably, they were given in anticipation of what that person would become. And here's the challenge: they did not all live out the meaning of their name. Perhaps we might say it this way: they did not fulfil their redemptive potential.

Josiah and Jeremiah lived up to their names as we will see with Jeremiah.
Josiah: God heals – the boy king who rediscovered the book of the law and brought a nation back to God. Others did not live up to their names.
Jehoiakim: The Lord raises up – but he abandoned his name and became a tyrant. Zedekiah: The Lord is righteous – he betrayed his name. One commentator described him as the weathercock - one who blows with the wind and who was defeated and blinded by king Nebuchadnezzar.

You have a name.

I have a name.

God knows my name. God knows your name.

Perhaps today we don't choose names as much for their meaning, as was the case when Jeremiah was born. Perhaps we choose names because we like them. Perhaps we choose the names for our children that we would really have liked to have been our name. Perhaps we choose a name because it has long been in the family and we are expected to choose that name. Perhaps, sometimes, we do choose a name because of its meaning.

But, when a child is born, we give them a name. You have a name, I have a name. God knows your name, God knows my name. Perhaps, what is important is not so much the meaning of the name, but that I have a name. When I was born my parents didn't give me a number, they gave me a name. And God knows my name; and he knows your name.

That we have a name shows we have potential. I am wondering – what does God see when he calls my name? What does God see when he calls your name? Friends, we have a choice: How much will we live out the potential of our name?

But now this is what the Lord says.

He who created you, Jacob, he who formed you Israel, 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name, you are mine.
(Isaiah 43 v 1)

But now this is what the Lord says.

He who created you Ian, he who formed you Ian. 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name, you are mine'

You are greatly loved and he knows your name.

Can a mother forget the infant at her breast, walk away from the baby she bore? But even if mothers forget, I'd never forget you, never! Look, I've written your names on the back of my hand. (Isaiah 49 v 15-16)

How are you living out your name?

You are greatly loved with a love that makes you beautiful. God doesn't hate you; he never has hated you and he never will hate you. He knows your name and he calls you by name every day, now, in these moments...The question is, how much will we live up to our name?

How about you?

1 The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. **2** The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, **3** and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.

The Call of Jeremiah

4 The word of the LORD came to me, saying,

5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;

I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. (Jeremiah 1 v 1-5)

Here's a challenging thought: Jeremiah's suffering begins with a divine call. We would do well to think about that friends. As we will read next week, right at the beginning of his call, God tells Jeremiah that the people of Judah will fight against him. Jeremiah, as we'll see, suffered greatly for being a prophet and speaking God's word to the people of God! Jeremiah stands at the crossroads of the call of God and he has a choice.

It seems that right here, right at the beginning, God understands there is an easy choice and a more difficult choice. There is an easier choice, but not more significant; easier but not more fulfilling. I'm wondering if this challenging thought is true: to follow the call of God is never the easy choice. If that's true, and I think it probably is, how are you doing?

When God speaks to Jeremiah at the beginning of his ministry, he says some things that will be really important for Jeremiah to grasp. And they are just as important for us to grasp today. God makes it clear to Jeremiah that life is his gift – a generous and precious gift. And we would do well to treat it as such a gift. It is God and only God, who breathes life, gives life and sustains life. And it is God, and only God, who shapes our destiny. That might be another way of saying that God sees your life and mine quite differently to the way we often see our own lives.

When Jeremiah thinks he's useless and worthless, God has a very different view of him. As he does of you and me. God makes it clear to Jeremiah that, long before Jeremiah will say 'Yes!' to God, God has said 'Yes!' to Jeremiah. That's another way of saying that long before we choose God, he chose us.

Here's the deep and profound truth: Jeremiah was always on God's mind! Always! And it seems that God had, always, something in mind for Jeremiah to do! Jeremiah's life didn't start with Jeremiah – it started with God. Here's the shocking truth: my life didn't start with me and your life didn't start with you. They started with God. And that means Jeremiah's life, my life, your life, is really, in truth, a response to God.

How are you doing?

God tells Jeremiah that he has been appointed by God to be a prophet to the nations. Very shortly he will tell Jeremiah that the nations will fight against him. If you were Jeremiah and God told you that you were to be a prophet to the nations, how do you think you would measure your success as a prophet? I think I would expect that the nations would listen to me and do what I said, since, to be fair, I would be speaking God's word! Here's a challenging truth: Jeremiah is being called to be a prophet, he is not being called to judge the effectiveness of his work, or the significance of his life!

We would do well to reflect on that truth.

We are called by God – each one of us – the God who has always had us on his mind – and right now, in these moments, still does. God has called us first to follow him and then to serve him and he has things for each of us that only we can do.

But God does not call us to judge the effectiveness of our work or the significance of our life – that's for him alone. And the truth is, that God sees things we will never see, and our lives will be effective in ways we may never know, because God is responsible for the effectiveness of his word.

Perhaps the most important thing for Jeremiah to grasp as God called him to a challenging ministry, was that through his calling he was part of a far bigger and a far better story than the one he could see in front of him. He was part of God's far bigger and far better story: the story of God's great and magnificent love. The far bigger and the far better story of the God whose love for his people was so great that he would simply never let them go. The far bigger and the far better story of God's great and magnificent love that would, once again, reach out to embrace those he loves. The far bigger and the far better story that has always been on God's mind. The far bigger and the far better story in which God knew Jeremiah by name.

And perhaps, what is most important for you and me today, right here, and right now, in these moments, is to grasp again, the deep and profound truth that in God's far bigger and far better story he knows you and me by name.

Ian, come join me in the story in which you have always been. Ian, come, I have work for you to do that only you can do. Ian, I have chosen you and I love you. Ian, come, join me, immerse yourself in my story, the far bigger and far better story.

Like Jeremiah, like Josiah, like Jehoiakim, like Zedekiah, I have a name, you have a name. Perhaps the question is: How will I live up to my name? And how will you?

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church, on Sunday 19th January 2020, by Rev. Ian Phillips.