

JEREMIAH, ON THE WHEEL

Running to Egypt?

As those of you who are part of CBC will know, I've been captured by six-word life stories. I've encouraged you in the past to think what six words might capture your life story. I have a couple of favourite six-word life stories that I've read:

Born bald; grew hair; bald again!

Cursed with cancer; blessed with friends (10 year old boy)

Should have learnt to count... (an accountant)

My own life story in six words is still: Born to talk, still doing it!

It got me thinking about what Jeremiah's six-word life story might be. From everything we've learnt about this extraordinary prophet so far as we've spent time in his book, and from what we might learn today, I think it might be this: "Running to Egypt? Not this one! "

I wrote the title for this talk a few months ago: Running to Egypt? But now, in the light of what I've learnt from him, and how his story ends, I think it should be his life story. And in six words: "Running to Egypt? Not this one!"

Maybe, at the end of this talk, you can decide if you think I'm right! Thinking about his life story in six words, got me thinking about what God would say to Jeremiah if he were to have written him a letter at the end of his life. Maybe it would go something like this:

Dear Jeremiah,

To my faithful servant. To my faithful friend. To the one who has stuck with it through all adversity and trial...

To the one I called all those years ago, the one who had not the eyes to see what I could see, but chose to follow wherever I would lead...

To the one who counted himself too young to be of use to me, but in that moment lost sight of the one who was calling...

To the one who saw the almond tree. To the one who had the courage to take me at my word...

To the one who walked by the potter's house to watch me craft a pot. To the one who watched me start again and do as I see best to the people I love...

To the one who bought a pot, took it to the potsherd gate and smashed it in faithfulness to me and my love for my people...

To the one who found himself the butt of the jokes, the focus of ridicule, the whipping boy of frustration and disbelief, the laughed at, the one mocked and physically abused...

To the one who faithfully and courageously spoke my words to a people who did not want to listen...

To the one who wrestled and cried, who felt anger and shame, who fell into the pit of despair on my account...

To the one who, even in the most difficult of times and circumstances, never gave up...

To the one who, despite everything and everyone around him, held on to the truth about me...

To the one who could have chosen a different path...

To the one who could have chosen an easy and comfortable way out...

To the one who has followed me whatever it has taken...

To the one who chose to stay when leaving would have been easier...

To the one who never looked for an easy or comfortable way out...

Thank you. Thank you. Well done good and faithful servant.

Jeremiah, I know you cannot see what I can see. I know you cannot know what I know. But you have been my instrument. You have been the one who has been keeping my dream alive. You are the one who has carried my message of love to the people I love. You have been the one who has spoken my words of love to the people I love. You have been the one who has modelled my love to my beloved people. You have been the one who has carried hope to the very heart of the people I love and long for. You have been the one to stand in the gap. You have been my hands and feet. You Jeremiah have shown my people that self-giving, self-sacrificing love really is at the heart of world. And you have shown my people that my heart of love is for them. You have shown them that

my heart is for them even in exile. You have shown them that I love them, because I love them, because I love them...

Jeremiah, you have no idea of the joy you bring to my heart. You have no idea of the effect of your ministry. You have no idea of what I have been able to do in the hearts of my people. And Jeremiah you have no idea of the effect your life will have on the generations that will follow your generation. You have no idea of how many will read your words, be challenged by your words, be saved and transformed by your words in the years and decades and centuries to follow.

Jeremiah, you have no idea how much your life, your faithfulness, your struggle, your wisdom, your choices will inspire many, many of those who love me and follow in generations to come.

Jeremiah, because of your life, your ministry, your faithfulness, your commitment, your struggle, your honesty, your vulnerability, your pain, your heartache, lives will be challenged and changed and transformed.

Jeremiah, you have been part of the far bigger and far better story than the one you have been able to see in front of you and the story in which you lived.

Jeremiah, well done good and faithful servant.

Because we can look back on his life, we know Jeremiah stayed true to his calling. And what is extraordinary is that he did it out of choice! There were other offers on the table! In chapter 40 of Jeremiah, there's an extraordinary incident in which Jeremiah is freed from Babylonian captivity. King Nebuchadnezzar made a series of invasions into Judah and Jerusalem, and in one of them Jeremiah too, was taken captive. On his way to Babylon with the other exiles, extraordinarily, a man named Nebuzaradan, a Babylonian commander, freed Jeremiah. Not only did he free him, he made him a promise. He promised that he would take care of him if Jeremiah went with him to Babylon. Or, he could return to the now ruined and desolate city of Jerusalem.

Effectively, Jeremiah was given the option of a good life, a comfortable life and a protected life. Staggeringly Jeremiah chose Jerusalem. He chose to give up a good, comfortable life, to continue serving his calling. Jeremiah went back to Jerusalem to be with those Israelites who had not even been considered worthy of being taken captive to Babylon.

Actually, Jeremiah had made the same choice right back in the beginning. He could have been a priest – that was what was expected of him and was the plan for his life. God called him to be a prophet – and that’s what he chose. Presented with the choice of a comfortable, secure life as a priest, or the uncertain, unpopular and lonely life of a prophet, he chose prophet. He chose the life of faith.

Those back in Jerusalem, the remnant, still lived in fear. Living the life of faith is hard and challenging. The Israelites in Jerusalem got tired of living by faith and when living by faith got too hard in Jerusalem, they wanted out – again! And Egypt offered them their out! When living the life of faith got too hard and they got tired of it, they looked for a better option, and living in Egypt looked a better offer. In Egypt they would be safe. In Egypt they would not be living under the Babylonian threat. Egypt could offer them what Jerusalem could not.

It was not the first time they had run to Egypt.

Abraham ran to Egypt in a famine. He lied his way in and instead of finding security, found himself in deceit and compromise. Within days of their extraordinary escape from Egypt across the Red Sea, the people complained to Moses, declaring they would be better off back in Egypt! Even on the verge of the Promised Land, they wished they were back in Egypt. As a result, what should have been an eleven-day journey, took them forty years! Even Solomon compromised the life of faith by marriage alliances with Egypt, which only ended in catastrophe for Israel.

And now, in Jeremiah’s day, Israel wants to run to Egypt again. Egypt is the place of what is known, what is comfortable. It offers security, it is not the place of a life of faith. When the life of faith becomes hard and unbearable, Israel runs to Egypt.

I wonder, when the life of faith becomes hard and unbearable, where do you run? When the life of faith becomes hard and unbearable what offers you security, certainty, comfort? Perhaps this difficult time we are all living through in these days, is a challenge to the life of faith. Perhaps the things we thought about God, or believed of God have been ripped from beneath us. Perhaps the security of our work, our job, our familiar routine has been threatened or lost completely.

Perhaps we have big questions about what God is, or is not, doing in these days, and our faith has been shaken and battered. Perhaps the future we saw or envisioned, or have worked so hard to put in place, has disappeared like the morning mist as the sun comes up.

To where are you tempted to run? In what or who will you put your trust when the life of faith is too hard? When the life of faith is hard and unbearable, here's what the people of Israel choose.

¹⁵This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'If you are determined to go to Egypt and you do go to settle there, ¹⁶then the sword you fear will overtake you there, and the famine you dread will follow you into Egypt, and there you will die. (Jeremiah 42 v 15-16)

⁴So Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers and all the people disobeyed the LORD's command to stay in the land of Judah. ⁵Instead, Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers led away all the remnant of Judah who had come back to live in the land of Judah from all the nations where they had been scattered. ⁶They also led away all those whom Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard had left with Gedaliah son of Ahikam, the son of Shaphan—the men, the women, the children and the king's daughters. And they took Jeremiah the prophet and Baruch son of Neriah along with them. ⁷So they entered Egypt in disobedience to the LORD and went as far as Tahpanhes. (Jeremiah 43 v 4-7)

¹¹"Therefore this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I am determined to bring disaster on you and to destroy all Judah. ¹²I will take away the remnant of Judah who were determined to go to Egypt to settle there. They will all perish in Egypt; they will fall by the sword or die from famine. From the least to the greatest, they will die by sword or famine. They will become a curse and an object of horror, a curse and an object of reproach. (Jeremiah 44 v 11-12)

The people of Israel run to Egypt. They took Jeremiah with them. They did the right thing in asking Jeremiah to ask the Lord what they should do, but they

refused to listen when the Lord said they should remain in Jerusalem and made their own choices. Egypt would not be good for them the Lord said. And it turned out, it wasn't.

Maybe this is just me, but I wonder that part of our struggle if the life of faith can be summed up in one word: mystery. Mostly I don't like mystery. Mostly, I don't do well with mystery. I prefer to know things, understand things, be assured about things. I find mystery hard because, well...it's mystery. Mystery I cannot understand, plan, control or change. Mystery is uncertain, ambiguous, confusing and mostly I can't see my way in mystery. Mystery does not make sense!

The option to stay in Jerusalem where there were lots of enemies and little food didn't make a lot of sense. But the truth is, God sees what we cannot see. What we often see is mystery. When the life of faith is hard and unbearable it is then we must trust ourselves fully to God in the mystery.

I have no desire to suggest that is easy – it certainly wasn't for Israel, it would seem. But the life of faith is not ultimately about what we know, what we can see or touch, what we can plan or be in control of. It is not about a set of assurances of beliefs about how things will go and what we can be certain of. The life of faith is centred on who it is we trust. And the life of faith, which it seems, is mostly lived in the mystery, is lived best when we fully trust the one who loves us because he loves us because he loves us...

In all the mystery, and even as he spent his final years in Egypt, Jeremiah never ran there. Perhaps, particularly in uncertain times, like the one we are now experiencing, we look towards what seems safe. Choosing the life of faith often appears dangerous. But in truth, to stay in Judah was not the risky choice, because that was where they would walk with God. The truth about the life of faith, it seems, is that mystery is where we walk most closely with God.

Please be careful how you understand what I am about to say. I hope you will hear what I AM saying, rather than what I am not saying. The current circumstances of Covid-19 that our world finds itself in, is not a good thing. But, in the mystery of everything that's going on, one good thing can be that we choose not to give up the life of faith because it is too hard, but that we choose to walk more closely with God in all the uncertainty. For, whatever happens, whatever is around the corner, walking closely with God is, in fact,

the safest place to be. Which leaves me wondering, what God might write to you and me when we face the choice of running to Egypt.

Maybe it would go something like this:

Dear Ian, Sandra, Sue, Denise, Chris, Clare, Andrew, Lesley...

To my beloved child...

To the one I love because I love because I love...

To the one who is right now facing circumstances that are challenging, difficult, unbearable perhaps even overwhelming...

Remember, I love you more than you could ever imagine. I love you to the cross and back. I love you and will never leave you. I want you to know that I have your best interests at heart. I am longing to walk with you. I am longing to stand alongside you. I am longing that you would turn your face toward me, because when you turn your face towards me, you turn your heart towards me too.

I am watching. I am waiting. I am hoping. I long for you to blossom into the fullness of who you are.

I am with you, watching, waiting, hoping. When the life of faith is hard and difficult and overwhelming and when the way ahead seems cloaked in mystery, I invite you to choose the way of love, to bet everything on love. I invite you not to run to Egypt, but to plunge yourself into the mystery of love.

For there you will find me.

Prepared by Rev. Ian Phillips, for live streaming on Sunday 26th April 2020 for Crawley Baptist church.