

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 14 March

Children's Talk: Refusing to Listen

We are talking about prophets. Prophets are people who spoke for the Lord and told people things the Lord wanted them to hear. Last week Mr. Smith talked about the prophet named Isaiah, and how he did not think he was good enough to speak for the Lord; but when the angel touched his mouth with a hot coal, he knew that he would be able to do what the Lord asked.

This week I am going to talk about the prophet named Jeremiah. Jeremiah's job was to tell people how they had turned away from the Lord and done evil. He wanted everyone to hear this message so that the people would stop being evil, and start being good.

So Jeremiah wrote out this message, and told his scribe to share it in Jerusalem. When many people heard the message they realized that the king himself needed to hear it. But the king had an interesting reaction. Let's see what he did:

So the king sent Jehudi to bring the scroll, and he took it from Elishama the scribe's chamber. And Jehudi read it in the hearing of the king and in the hearing of all the princes who stood beside the king. Now the king was sitting in the winter house in the ninth month, with a fire burning on the hearth before him. And it happened, when Jehudi had read three or four columns, that the king cut it with the scribe's knife and cast it into the fire that was on the hearth, until all the scroll was consumed in the fire that was on the hearth. Yet they were not afraid, nor did they tear their garments, the king nor any of his servants who heard all these words. Nevertheless Elnathan, Delaiah, and Gemariah implored the king not to burn the scroll; but he would not listen to them. And the king commanded Jerahmeel the king's son, Seraiah the son of Azriel, and Shelemiah the son of Abdeel, to seize Baruch the scribe and Jeremiah the prophet, but Jehovah hid them. (Jeremiah 36:21-26)

So why did Jeremiah (and the Lord) want to hear that they had been doing evil things? Was it to make them feel bad? Was it to make fun of them? Was it to hurt them? No! It was so they had a chance to change and become better!

But the king did not want to hear that he was doing bad things. He only wanted to hear that he was the best. So as each part of the scroll was read, the king would rip it out and through it into the fire. Even when his servants begged him not to, he continued.

Why do you think the king did not want to hear about the bad things he had done? How does it feel to hear that you have done something wrong? It doesn't feel good, does it. It hurts. It makes us feel bad. It makes us sad. It makes us embarrassed. And because we don't like feeling those ways, we ignore it, just like the king did. When someone says we hurt them, we block our ears; or turn it into a joke; or run away; or turn it around and make it about them. Anything to not hear that we have done something bad.

But again, why had Jeremiah shared the message? To make people better! The king could not become better until he chose to listen to what the Lord had to say. And we can only become better if we listen to people when we say that we hurt them. It is painful to realize we have done something bad. But when we stop doing the bad thing, and do good things instead, we will feel so much better.

Finding Jesus in the Lives of the Prophets, Part 2: Jeremiah

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

14 March, 2021

This week we continue to draw parallels between the lives of various prophets and the life of Jesus. These parallels are not coincidences or even mere foreshadowing: the whole of Scripture speaks, on a spiritual level, to the process that the Lord underwent to unite Divinity and Humanity in Himself. By seeing this process in various Old Testament characters we gain a fuller picture of who the Lord was and is. This week we are going to talk about the prophet Jeremiah.

First, some context. Jeremiah was alive at the tail-end of the Kingdom of Judah. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had already been scattered, never to return, as punishment for their sins. The Kingdom of Judah was not far behind. Jeremiah's life story is one of predicting the horrific consequences that the people would face, the constant harassment from his own people, and a constant reminder that if people listened to the Lord now and accepted their faults, their short term suffering would be more than compensated for by the long term benefits.

The book of Jeremiah begins with an exchange between the prophet and Jehovah.

Then the word of Jehovah came to me, saying:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you;
Before you were born I sanctified you;
I ordained you a prophet to the nations.”

Then said I:

“Ah, Lord Jehovah!
Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth.”

But Jehovah said to me:

“Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’
For you shall go to all to whom I send you,
And whatever I command you, you shall speak.
Do not be afraid of their faces,
For I am with you to deliver you,” says Jehovah.

Then Jehovah put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and Jehovah said to me:

“Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.
See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms,
To root out and to pull down,
To destroy and to throw down,
To build and to plant.” (Jeremiah 1:4-10)

In the literal sense this exchange is straightforward: from before his birth, the Lord prepared Jeremiah to become a prophet; when commissioned to fulfil this role, Jeremiah hesitated, protesting his youth; the Lord then reassured him that He would put His own words into Jeremiah's mouth, and would send him out to both destroy and to build up.

But how this relates to Jesus is less clear. Certainly Jesus was a prophet sent to preach to the people of Israel. But we don't really associate hesitancy and fear with Jesus. It would almost seem sacrilegious to do so. And yet there is a reason that the Lord came into the world as a small child, and grew through childhood and

adolescence, and only revealed Himself to the world after 30 years or so of maturing. Insofar as Jesus relied on the very human mind and body that all of us have, He was, indeed, incapable. We fallible humans can never achieve anything on our own. If left to ourselves we descend to the lowest common denominator of hell. This is the condition that Jesus took on in the world.

But just as Jehovah put His words into Jeremiah's mouth, Jesus received power not from His fallible human nature but from the Divine soul that resided within Him. This Divine soul is referred to both as Jehovah and as the Father. Jesus Himself taught that He did not speak from His own authority but from the Father's:

For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak. (John 12:49-50)

If we were to think of Jesus and His Father as two separate people this would have a somewhat superficial interpretation: God just told Jesus what to say. But the New Church teaches that Jesus and His Father were not two separate people. Rather, "the Father" refers to God's Divine Love, and Jesus is that same love in Human form, a window into the Divine as it were, revealing the truth of who God is. That truth, the truth that Jesus taught and shared, had power not from any human power or reasoning. Its power came from the fact that it was drawn exclusively from Infinite Love.

In all His confrontations with the leaders of the day, and with all His combats against the forces of hell, Jesus fought from this Divine Love, and because He fought from this love, He conquered. The power of the Divine is illustrated well in what the Lord told Jeremiah about the protection he would be granted as a prophet; and it takes on new meaning when we realize that this was the same power that Jesus took on:

"Therefore prepare yourself and arise,
And speak to them all that I command you.
Do not be dismayed before their faces,
Lest I dismay you before them.
For behold, I have made you this day
A fortified city and an iron pillar,
And bronze walls against the whole land—
Against the kings of Judah,
Against its princes,
Against its priests,
And against the people of the land.
They will fight against you,
But they shall not prevail against you.
For I am with you," says Jehovah, "to deliver you."
(Jeremiah 1:17-19)

In the case of Jesus this promise was not one of Earthly protection against Earthly enemies: it was a promise of Spiritual protection against falsity and evil, and a promise of truth and wisdom that could ward off all the assaults of hell.

I want to step aside from just recounting the story of Jeremiah as it foreshadows the life of Jesus, and spend some time talking about why this matters. What do we learn that otherwise would be obscure? If the life of Jeremiah is an echo of the life of Jesus, why don't we just read about Jesus directly and leave Jeremiah behind? The Teachings of the New Church explain that the Old Testament, when understood spiritually, actually tells us things we would never know about Jesus just by reading the Gospels. The story we have before us is a prime example. Jesus, although He was certainly confrontational, and although He warned of an impending threat, it's not exactly clear in the Gospels how serious this was. A superficial reading would tell the story of Jesus this way: there were abusive leaders in Israel. A man showed up, argued with them, and did miracles. For His troubles He was killed. And while His movement survived, and would go on to change the world, the immediate impact of His life on the world was, in the grand scheme of things, minor.

Contrast that with Jeremiah: his role as a prophet was to constantly warn of a massive empire that threatened to swallow all of Israel. Very real doom stood threatening throughout his lifetime as he told of a future destruction. When Jesus was in the world, a similar empire of evil stood threatening. All the forces of hell threatened not just a small group of Jews living in a lonely corner of the Roman world, but the entirety of humanity. This story is also retold in more abstract language in the teachings of the New Church:

Jehovah God is love itself and wisdom itself, or goodness itself and truth itself. As divine truth, or the Word, which was "God with God," he came down and took on a human for the purpose of forcing everything in heaven, everything in hell, and everything in the church back into the divine design. The power of hell had become stronger than the power of heaven, and on earth the power of evil had become stronger than the power of goodness; therefore total damnation stood threatening at the door. By means of his human, which was divine truth, Jehovah God lifted this pending damnation and redeemed both people and angels. (*True Christian Religion* §3)

We don't technically need to know about Jeremiah to know this fact. But when we understand Jeremiah's situation, and see in it a reflection of the one Jesus faced, our understanding is fleshed out.

We'll now turn back to one other aspect of Jeremiah's role as a prophet that deepens our understanding of the life of Jesus. Jeremiah was required to be the bearer of bad news in the face of stark opposition. We already read in the children's talk how the king burned his message rather than hear it. There are many more examples of people trying to silence Jeremiah and dismissing his message with disdain, people who would tell the people, "'peace, peace!' when there [was] no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14), people who would tell them that the Babylonians would never win, when in actual fact the Lord had already promised them that they would spend 70 years in captivity before they would regain their freedom. But this was not what people wanted to hear; and so they abused, assaulted, threatened, and tried to kill Jeremiah, the messenger.

This very response to the Lord's message is actually part of the purpose of the message: when people were forced to confront the message that they did not want to hear, the message that condemned their actions and foretold dire consequences, it elicited the reaction that showed their true colours. When truth is shone on evil the response it elicits shows evil for what it truly is, so that its nature

can be seen. Jeremiah's trials and tribulations (and there were many) illustrate just how this principle plays out.

Jesus played a similar role. Like Jeremiah, He told the people things that they did not want to hear, things about their sinfulness and its consequences. And like with Jeremiah, they decided to kill Him rather than listen to His message. And yet this very reaction accomplished Jesus' purpose: the evil were revealed by their opposition to the light:

This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God." (John 3:19-21)

Isn't it true that the more light is shone on evil, the more we scurry away from the light? The person who most despises the truth is a liar confronted with his own lies, for example.

As Jesus shone this light on the people of His day it is interesting to wonder if the same dynamics came into play as did for Jeremiah. Jeremiah was proclaiming defeat in a time of war, and so was seen as the ultimate traitor. How easy would it have been to cast Jesus as a traitor, undermining his rightful leaders and betraying his people? It is so obvious that Jesus is the good guy in the story that we hardly think of it. But how many of us, if we lived at the same time as Him, when Jesus told us to embrace sinners and let go of vengeance, would have seen Him as a traitor, and hated Him for it? How many of us would have hated Him for pointing out our hypocrisy and attachment to wealth? More often than not I think we have the role of the scribes and Pharisees than that of the meek and devoted followers. If the Word, or prayer, or Church, ever elicits an uncomfortable response, we should be ready to examine that. Perhaps we, like the people of Israel, are uncomfortable hearing what the Lord has to say, and would rather hear, "peace, peace!" When faced with hard messages, it stirs our selfishness to the surface; and then we are forced to grapple with the question of what to do with it: will we protest and reject the message, or will we humbly submit to the Lord?

In Jeremiah's time, for the most part it seems, people held even more tightly to their evils. Yet even so, Jeremiah's message was not all doom and gloom. He also shared a beautiful message of what was to come if people used the opportunity of being broken down to turn once more to the Lord:

"Behold, the days are coming," says Jehovah, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them," says Jehovah. "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days," says Jehovah: "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know Jehovah,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," says Jehovah. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."
(Jeremiah 31:31-34)

This promise of hope was fulfilled when Jesus came into the world, and offered the New Covenant through repentance and forgiveness of sins. And it is still fulfilled even today, as we acknowledge our failings, pray to the Lord for help, turn away from our evils, and in their place live a good life.

In the life of Jeremiah we see the hardship of proclaiming the bad news. But we also see the hope of the Lord, that through hardship, if we are willing, we may be saved, and at last find the peace of His heavenly Kingdom.

Amen.