

Sermon

There's a valuable contrast in today's readings. On the one hand, Jeremiah, the writer of Psalm 69 and the disciples are none of them having a good time. On the other, trust in God shines through. Might that be a word for our time?

Jeremiah has been described as 'overwhelmingly God's man', boldly going out on a prophetic limb. He meets the inevitable vulnerability of that with ruthlessness.¹ In Chapter 18, he's spoken a harsh word of judgement – he hears God lament that 'my people have forgotten me'(18.15), and so, like a potter who starts again when the jar is flawed, God says 'I will scatter them before the enemy. I will show them my back, not my face.' (18.17) Even as he tells it like it is, it's no surprise that doing so costs Jeremiah dear. Not only do his hearers not like it, *really* not like it, but also he finds it uncomfortable himself – he is part of the very culture that he is lambasting. So by chapter 20 – from which we heard - his words are racked with 'pathos, hurt and despair'.² 'I have become a laughing-stock all day long; everyone mocks me... the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.' (20.7) The prophet is tormented with a gut-wrenching dilemma: if he speaks, even his close friends denounce him; if he doesn't, he feels the word of God like fire burning in his bones. (cf 20.9)

The Psalmist is rather similar. Psalm 69 suggests a person who thinks they are an innocent suffering at the hand of religious opponents. How easily Jeremiah might have made the Psalmist's words his own: 'Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.' (69.1)

And from what we heard, the disciples are feeling pretty challenged, too. By Chapter 10 of Matthew's version of the Gospel, they are discovering the costs of discipleship: that speaking God's word of shalom will ironically earn them the same angry response from their religious contemporaries as Jeremiah did. Jesus doesn't seem to have a vote-winning manifesto: he's offering not peace but a sword, family division; and the ultimate enticement – you'll only find life if you lose it. Perhaps Psalm 69 welled-up in them, too, a sort of heartfelt spiritual.

Although we may not be in their shoes, and whilst we may not all be feeling the same way as each other, maybe that sense of *not having such a good time* speaks for some of us, as well.

- I think of key workers in the health and education services, for whom satisfaction is so diluted by the demands of over work and by still-evolving policies and expectations;
- I think of those marking the LGBT-focussed *Pride* month, for too many of whom an LGBT identity is about being marginalised and vulnerable;
- I think of everyone who feels their breathing is constricted by racism;
- I think of people oppressed for their religion or for convictions other than religion;
- I think of people bereaved;
- I think of people with challenges known only to them and God, but that leave them feeling that Psalm 69's opening could be their spiritual: 'Save me, O God.'

If we read on, though, the Psalm ends with a note rich in trust and praise: 'I will praise the name of the Lord with a song.' (Psalm 69.30)

¹ Brueggemann, Walter 2006 *Like Fire in the Bone: listening for the Prophetic Word in Jeremiah* Minneapolis: Fortress Press pages 4 and 6

² Brueggemann, Walter 1998 *A commentary on Jeremiah: exile and homecoming* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans page 181

In a different but complementary way, Matthew has Jesus offer reassurance to the overwhelmed disciples: thrice we are told 'do not be afraid. 10.26, 28, 31) That's also where he tells us that if God cares for the sparrows, how much more for us. I confess to finding real inspiration in the Psalmist's faith, just as in the profound witness of black spirituality.

But I am still left asking, how does God's eye being on the sparrow help, when we're oppressed by things undone because expectations are unclear or unrealistic, bereft of a beloved, or victim to that prejudice which rejects us because of or sexuality, ability or appearance? race

Well, I think Paul has the answer to that. The eye God has on the sparrow is not just the eye of adoring parental love, as if just murmuring the word love somehow puts everything right. It's the eye of one who gave Jesus Christ to die that we might live. It's the eye of the One who has seen the healing and help creation needs, and offered it in the living and dying and rising of Jesus. And as we are baptised into Christ, the riches of his victory over 'sin, the world and devil' become ours to grasp.

So it is, that even as we go where Jeremiah, the Psalmist and the disciples went – the Psalmist called it 'the Pit' – we do not need to be afraid: it's the Redeemer's eye that is on the sparrow. Like the sparrows we might fall, but we will not fall from the hand of the Potter who made us, nor from the nail-marked hands of the one who saved us.

In truth, that is what Black spirituality taught me – in the heart and in the gut, to trust God's mercy and grace into which I am baptised. Yes, there are times when it is right to intellectualise it, but when everything has been said, Christian faith is not about what we think of God; it's about what trusting what God thinks of us. I got to know this best from people whose lives were shaped but not destroyed by *apartheid* in South Africa. The horror of that heretical theology and sinful practice *did* make people cry out 'Save me, O God,' - and cry it out they did, till their throat was parched. (Psalm 69.3) But what they discovered by baptism into Christ was that through the victory of the cross, goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate. That's the eye which is on the sparrow.

And then, says Paul - as much to us as to the Romans - *live* the new life that Christ won for you. Don't just live it in spiritual songs, though they will help; live it, too, in grace-filled action which honours all as equal and walks in solidarity with those who are struggling. That way, grace will abound, people will be blessed and God will be glorified.