

The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah



Bible Notes January – March 2010

50p

January 1st Naming of Jesus

Jeremiah 1 vv 1-3

Happy New Year! I thought it would be a good idea to have another look at the Old Testament this quarter and Jeremiah is a very significant and a very human prophet. We can relate to Jeremiah. Some people imagine that priests and prophets in ancient Israel were somewhat in opposition to one another, but we see here that Jeremiah is of a priestly family. There was no necessary conflict of interest between priest and prophet. His home was Anathoth, a village not too far from Jerusalem.

The historical context is that the Assyrians had rampaged through the Middle East some decades before this, conquering the northern kingdom of Israel, forcing some of the Israelites into exile and importing people of non-Israelite tribes to live in the holy land. They had done a lot of damage to the southern kingdom based around Jerusalem, but had never succeeded in completely overcoming it. This was because the southerners were more faithful to God than the northerners.

Josiah was a good king, under whose leadership there was a religious revival. He got himself killed fighting Pharaoh and was succeeded by two of his sons, his grandson and a third son. None of these was much good and Jeremiah had first to warn them and the people of the consequences of their actions, to advise them how to act wisely and finally to attempt to support and console them when eventually the Babylonians destroyed the temple, ruined the city and took the leading citizens into captivity.

P.S: Today is the Feast of the Naming of Jesus. Note the way Jeremiah's name ends with the letters IAH, like so many names in the OT. This is Yahweh and also forms part on the Name Jesus (though this is not apparent in translation into English via Greek and Latin!) but it is important to identify Christ with God and CHRISTians with Christ.

January 2nd

Jeremiah 1 vv 4-10

Two great biblical themes. God knows us even before we are born and He has plans for us. That is why you and I pray that *we may do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in.*

The other great biblical theme is that *God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty*. Time and again in the Bible, the people God calls to do great things are the least likely. Greatest of all is the One Who dies a shameful death on the cross. When the Church measures herself by the standards of this world – how powerful she is, how rich, how much she is respected, that Church has failed in her vocation and is on the way out. When the Church recognises her need of God because she herself, without Him, is weak, poor and despised, it is then that she can fulfil her vocation to fulfil the mission of the crucified Saviour. So don't be discouraged by our problems. They are God's opportunities.

*Rejoice! Rejoice!
Christ is in you,
The hope of glory in our hearts,
He lives! He lives!
His breath is in you,
Arise a mighty army, we arise.*

Now is the time for us to march
upon this land;
Into our hands He will give the
ground we claim.
He rides in majesty to lead us
into victory
The world shall see that Christ
is Lord.

God is at work in us
His purpose to perform,
Building a kingdom
Of power not of words,
Where things impossible
By faith shall be made possible;
Lets give the glory to Him now.

Though we are weak His grace
Is everything we need;
We're made of clay
But this treasure is within.
He turns our weaknesses
Into His opportunities,
So that the glory
Goes to Him.

Graham Kendrick.

January 3rd

Jeremiah 1 vv 11-16

Prophets use pictures as well as words. The almond tree means that things are about to start happening because the almond is one of the first trees to flower in the Spring. That is why Halling Sunday School planted an almond tree in the churchyard. The boiling pot represents the turmoil coming when the pagan nations invade the holy city. This will happen because the holy people have behaved like pagans, worshipping their own handiwork, rather than the God Who made them!

January 4th

Jeremiah 1 vv 17-19

“The pen is mightier than the sword” is a quotation from a C19 play, but the idea is much more ancient. Words, reason, ideas do, in the end, matter far more than physical force. You can’t quench the spirit.

Human reason is a pale reflection of the divine Reason. Our words originate in the divine Word and the closer they are to their source, the nearer they are to the truth and the more powerful, therefore, they are. God creates the world and shapes human history by His Word. The prophets are bearers of His Word. Jesus is the Word of God in person – which is why Mary is referred to sometimes as Bearer of the eternal Word. At His Ascension, Christ entrusts the Word of God to His Church, which makes us too bearers of the eternal Word and therefore able to stand before kings, princes and the people of the land.

January 5th

Jeremiah 2 vv 1-8

“Losing My Religion” is a song by R.E.M., but how come people do lose their religion? Often, they just seem to drift away for no very good reason. At one stage in their life, church is vitally important to them. They put church before sport or entertainment, maybe even before home, work and family. They pray a lot. They seek confirmation. And then they drift away. How come their first love has grown so cold?

January 6th (Epiphany)

Jeremiah 2 vv 9-13

Epiphany is about the Gentiles coming to the God of Israel through Jesus Christ. Today’s passage from Jeremiah is effectively the opposite of that. The pagans, Jeremiah says, are faithful to their false gods, whereas the chosen people have forgotten about the one true God and effectively become pagans. It is as if you’d chosen to have your mains water disconnected and then bought a leaky bucket to bring water from the well. You’d surely be mad to do that. So what about a nation that tries to be Christian for 1,500 years and then decides over a couple of decades that one religion is as good as another, that no religion is true in any absolute sense, that there are no universal moral values and that shopping or DIY is a more useful way to spend your time than public worship?

January 7th

Jeremiah 2 vv 14-19

In God, we are free – free from sin, free from the fear of death, free of human domination. So why act like slaves fearful of taking responsibility for our own lives? Having lost faith in God, the Jews of Jeremiah's day were fearful of the great powers – the Assyrians and the Egyptians and later the Babylonians. These were the people with the money, fine buildings, chariots and weaponry, huge armies. The Jews wheedled. They kowtowed. They defied. They made alliances. They rebelled. Whether to obtain the protection of the great powers or to escape from them, they made political calculations and compromised their own integrity. The result was that the whole house of cards came tumbling down.

We also live in a world whose course seems to be determined by those with money and power. Do we compromise our integrity either to win their favour or to rebel against them? Either way, we become slaves to sin once again. Or do we put our faith in God and act as His children, free to do what is right, whatever the consequences in worldly terms?

January 8th

Jeremiah 2 vv 20-37

God set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt. They made a covenant that they would be God's people. Yet they very soon started worshipping false gods, oppressing the poor and kowtowing to the rich. Even when they maintained the rituals of worshipping God, they did not keep His commandments in terms of acting honestly in business, taking proper care of the poor and living in peace with their neighbours. When they enjoyed peace and prosperity, they forgot all about true religion and when things went wrong they turned to powerful people and their own handiwork to save them. The result was disaster. Only in God are we truly free.

Think about English history. Since 597AD when the King of Kent welcomed the mission of St Augustine we have claimed to be a Christian nation. Yet, only too often, even when many of us went faithfully to Church each week, our land has been disfigured by bloodshed, war with other nations, the neglect of the poor. We've failed to live up to what we are supposed to be – people of God. Yet, I

am quite sure, that English history is much brighter and better because of our Christian heritage than it would have been without it. Look at the way nations without a Christian heritage have grown up. I think our report card wouldn't read neither *Well done thou good and faithful servant*, nor F-, but *Could do better*.

But where are we going now? What can we learn from Jeremiah for our own nation today?

January 9th

Jeremiah 3 vv 1-5

I admit this is difficult, but I'm trying! If a wife commits adultery, ought her husband to take her back if she says she is sorry? If a man divorces his wife and she marries someone else who subsequently divorces her, should the first husband take her back? (No, according to Deuteronomy 24). If a married woman runs away to become a prostitute and, when that life goes badly wrong, returns to her husband, should he take her back? This is the worst of the three cases, but it seems that it is what God asked the prophet Hosea to do and that Hosea's faithfulness to his faithless wife was to be taken as a sign of God's faithfulness to His faithless people. Hosea lived before the time of Jeremiah and Jeremiah and his audience may well have known this story.

Well, what do you think? Should a man take back a wife who has left him to earn a living as a prostitute and apparently only come back because her pimp has ill treated her and she's hungry? It doesn't seem reasonable. Yet, Jeremiah says, it was what the people of Israel seemed to expect – like all those people who mostly live as if there were no God and then think it will help to pray in a crisis. What do you think God will do?

January 10th

Jeremiah 3 vv 6-11

I often like to point out that the relationship between Christ and the Church is like a marriage, as is the relationship between the believer and God. The two become one as they mutually promise eternal and unconditional love. Baptism is, therefore, like a wedding. The

corollary of this is that apostasy (turning away from God, losing your religion) is the equivalent of adultery or divorce.

The northern kingdom had committed apostasy (worshipping false gods), adultery against God. Outside the matrimonial home (the Household of Faith) life had turned out to be pretty rough. The Assyrians destroyed their kingdom. Yet God offers to restore them to their former position if only they will return to Him.

The sad story of the northern kingdom should serve as a warning to the southern kingdom. They are not yet destroyed at this stage, but they are on that broad road which leads to destruction, the path of apostasy.

Yet God promises restoration if only they will repent. He promises the reunification of Israel as the people of God. These passages about northerners and southerners coming back to God as one people foreshadow even more wonderful promises of people of every nation becoming one people under God, worshipping Him eternally in the heavenly Jerusalem.

January 11th

Jeremiah 3 vv 12-25

Many of the false gods the Israelites worshipped were called Baal. One of the meanings of the word Baal is "husband". Pagan worship was carried out in groves of trees and on the high places (hills and mountains). People also worshipped Yahweh in unorthodox and often unacceptable ways in these places. The Ark of the Covenant was what Moses made to signify the presence of God with His people and was carried about with them in their 40 year wanderings through the desert. Hundreds of years later it was found a permanent home in the Temple at Jerusalem, but it is not quite clear what happened to it after that. Worship is only worship if it is worship in spirit and in truth. Centralising public worship in Jerusalem was intended to guarantee the integrity of worship, but worship is only completely authentic in Jesus Christ, Who is Himself the Temple, the High Priest and the Sacrifice, as well as the Way, the Truth and the Life.

January 12th

Jeremiah 4 vv 1-18

1976 was the year of the drought. It was also one of many such years when the British economy was in trouble. The drought broke in October, when it seemed to rain nearly every day. (I remember because I was cycling daily from Camberwell to the Strand at the time.) A church on the South Circular Road put up a poster suggesting that prayer had brought an end to the drought and asking whether it might help with Financial Times Index of shares. To believe that repentance and prayer would make a difference you have to believe both that God exists and that He acts in this world.

January 13th

Jeremiah 4 vv 19-31

Jeremiah loves the Jewish people and he experiences both anguish at what is coming upon them and frustration that they are bringing the disaster upon themselves through their rejection of God. Jeremiah identifies closely with God Who also loves His people is anguished at what they are bringing upon themselves and frustrated that they refuse to listen.

January 14th

Jeremiah 5 vv 1-9

The implication is that the nation would not be destroyed if there were any good in it at all. Go to the inner city housing estates and look at the crime and vandalism, the high rates of illegitimacy and substance abuse. Maybe the poor don't know any better, haven't had much chance in life. So go to the City of London and consider what the rich are doing. Are they using their power and wealth to make sure that everybody has enough or are they growing rich at other people's expense? Go to Westminster. Are the politicians men and women of integrity humbling serving the public or are they ruthlessly and dishonestly clinging on to power in order to further their own ends. On the inner city estates, in the big banks, in the corridors of power, does anyone care what God thinks of what they are doing?

January 15th

Jeremiah 5 vv 10-18

Religion is not important. The things that do matter are having enough money to make the wheels go round, armed forces sufficient to defend the interests of the state and to pursue those interests abroad, building a tolerant multicultural society and making material progress without causing ecological catastrophe. Religion is a nuisance if it threatens the national consensus on attitudes to such matters as abortion, euthanasia, embryo research, homosexuality and the impermanence of marriage. Religion is to be resisted if it attempts to question our war aims or our financial strategy. Carefully controlled, religion can be used to promote community cohesion. It provides opium for hurting people. Its rituals underpin national events such as coronations. In short, religion is an optional extra both for individuals and for society at large. Insofar as it helps promote the government's agenda, religion is welcome, but if it encourages people to think for themselves and to question public policy, religion is to be derided and marginalised.

January 16th

Jeremiah 5 vv 19-31

So, where will we look when it all starts to go wrong? If people believe in God at all, they see Him as something like Father Christmas – bearded, aged and benevolent. Any threats that bad children won't get presents are not to be taken seriously. So, when the house of cards comes crashing down, people won't blame themselves. They'll blame God or they'll say He can't possibly exist, because, if there were a God, we could make complete messes of our individual lives and of the nation we inhabit and God would rescue us.

January 17th

Jeremiah 6 vv 1-12

Jeremiah belongs to the tribe of Benjamin and he warns the Benjaminites to escape from the holy city and to return to their ancestral lands before the calamity comes. In the same way, Jesus warns His followers to get out of Jerusalem before the Romans destroy it again 600 years after the Babylonians. The faithful don't necessarily get an easy life but they can trust the faithfulness of God.

January 18th

Jeremiah 6 vv 13-30

Forgive me if you have heard me tell this story before. I once knew a man who had been a curate in London before World War II. His family were Jewish and they came from Eastern Europe. Some of them would die in the concentration camps. This man could see war coming when politicians and senior churchmen were busily denying it, promising *peace in our time*, and appeasing Hitler. He preached on this chapter, reminding people that 600 years before Christ politicians and churchmen preached *peace, peace, where there is no peace*. They daren't offend people. They liked being respected and looked up to. They enjoyed being well paid. But, in 1939AD and in 597BC, all these complacent people were proved wrong. War was coming and there would be a terrible price to pay. People don't need false reassurances, promises which are impossible to keep, lies & spin, complacency, from their politicians and preachers. What we need is to here the truth so that we can all work together to deal with it.

January 19th

Jeremiah 7 vv 1-7

The Archbishop of Canterbury was brave when he reminded the congregation at St Paul's of the human cost of the Iraq War. So was Dr Runcie when he reminded the congregation giving thanks for victory in the Falklands that we must not forget the Argentinean dead and injured. Religion sustains us but it must also challenge us. Paradoxically, a faith which no longer challenges us can no longer sustain us either.

January 20th

Jeremiah 7 vv 8-16

Hundreds of years before this, the Ark of the Covenant had been kept at Shiloh. When the Philistines attacked, the Israelites thought that they would be guaranteed victory if they took the Ark with them into battle. In fact, it just made the Philistines fight harder. The Israelites lost the battle. Their priests were killed and the Philistines captured the Ark. True religion is not simply a matter of carrying out "religious" actions. Nor is it a matter of experiencing "religious" feelings (my! spirituality). True religion is a whole life live in harmony with God's Law of love. Religion includes public worship and private prayer. It does engage with our emotions, but all that is meaningless if it fails to transform our lives.

January 21st

Jeremiah 7 vv 17-20

This is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. We have got used to the idea that Christians in other churches are essentially the same as us. We wouldn't have too much difficulty in combining with them if our leaders could come to agreement about our theological differences (which most of us don't understand anyway) and if people in other churches would only come to share our taste in hymns and prayers.

It may also be that we are becoming equally generous towards people of other religions. We believe in tolerance. We don't really understand the doctrinal differences. We might even find that other religions are our allies in an increasingly secular society.

The Bible will not, however, allow us an *anything goes in the name of tolerance* approach to faith. Some things are true and some false. Some differences matter even if many don't. It is indeed correct to respect people of other faiths and other Christian denominations, but it is also right to have integrity. We need to think and pray about our differences before we decide whether they really matter.

January 22nd

Jeremiah 7 vv 21-28

One of the surprises (for many people) is actually the persistence of religion in C21. Many commentators thirty years ago assumed that religion was dying. In Britain and Europe, people had stopped going to church. The influence of religion on morality and the conduct of government was waning fast. The somewhat arrogant assumption was that European culture was a world leader, that it had outgrown religion and that religion would disappear from the rest of the world as Africa, South America and Asia "caught up" with us. The USA was always the puzzling exception, where a civilisation much like ours in so many ways remains so stubbornly religious. In the last couple of decades, we have seen the churches growing rapidly in Africa, China and parts of South America. The religious devotion of ethnic minority communities in Britain and Europe is making it impossible for Western governments to ignore the benefits brought and the problems caused by Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism. The Jews have always had an influence much greater than merely their numbers would justify. Even Richard

Dawkins' militant atheism is a kind of religion, a movement deriving new life from the resurgent fundamentalism it feels bound to counter.

The rise in "Humanist" funerals is intriguing. If people really supposed that we were no different from animals, presumably they would dispose of granddad's body with no more ceremony than they dispose of a dead pet. But, no, even if they claim not to be religious, they want a service. They want a ritual which somehow gives expression to their beliefs. What they do not want is a vicar reminding them that there is a judgment and questioning the appropriateness of their favourite music and readings or their quaint hopes that, whether or not there is an afterlife, what happens to them hereafter might in some way depend on what they have done in the here and now.

As some scientists put it, human beings are "hard-wired" to be religious. It is in our nature to be religious. What the prophet and preacher have to do is to channel that religiosity into a genuine faith.

January 23rd

Jeremiah 7 vv 29-34

The answer to those who say that all religions are equally valid is that some religions practise human sacrifice.

January 24th

Jeremiah 8 vv 1-3

One of the reasons that archaeologists and anthropologists believe that Stone Age people were religious is that they disposed of the bodies of their dead carefully and ritualistically. They evidently did not regard dead human bodies as so much garbage to get rid of. The desire for a proper funeral runs very deep. So it is a measure of revulsion against the Judean leadership for the idolatry which they have practised that their graves will be desecrated.

January 25th (Conversion of St Paul)

Jeremiah 8 vv 4-12

The Jewish teachers in Jeremiah's time had led the people astray from God – not, it seems, that they needed much leading. Saul was a Jewish scholar in the time of Jesus. He rejected what God was doing in Christ and tried to prevent his compatriots from following Jesus. Then God gave Saul the grace to be converted and he became Paul the apostle to

the Gentiles. He accepted Jesus and preached Jesus to the world. In one sense, Israel's rejection of Jesus opened the way to the proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles, but Paul did not regard this as meaning that Israel was now outside the mercy of God. He did not forget that he was himself a Jew. He did not lose his sense of brotherly solidarity with the Jews. He had faith that the Gentile mission would eventually lead also to the conversion of the Jews. Paul carefully interprets the OT warnings to the Jews in passages (like the one we have just read) to mean that through these judgments God will have mercy on the whole of humanity.

O God, who, through the preaching of the blessed Apostle Saint Paul, hast caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world: Grant, we beseech thee, that we, having his wonderful conversion in remembrance, may shew forth our thankfulness unto thee for the same, by following the holy doctrine which he taught; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

January 26th

Jeremiah 8 vv 13-22

The flu epidemic after World War I killed more people than the fighting. War spreads disease. It disrupts agriculture and leads to hunger. Boundaries are broken down. Chaos replaces order. Anarchy follows the collapse of government. We often forget that there are far more casualties of war than those hurt by the actual fighting. Human society is a delicate organism which depends on respect – respect for God and respect for other people. Respect is mutual and it is in respecting ourselves that we can respect others just as it is in our respect for God that we discover self respect.

Like Jeremiah, we can despair at the apparent inability of warring factions to find an agreement that would bring a just order out of the chaos of conflict. There are resources for healing our differences. It is just that human beings are too stubborn to make use of them. Prayer would be a good start.

January 27th

Jeremiah 9 vv 1-11

Jeremiah has something of a reputation for moaning, but he had plenty to moan about. The country he lived in was in a terrible state and it was about to get a lot worse with the Babylonian invasion. He had plenty of reason to moan and, indeed, to condemn both their wrong-doing and their refusal to examine their lives in the light of what was about to befall them.

For all that, however, Jeremiah loves the people. Like God, he does not want to see the death of the sinner! I recently read an interesting article about the Gospel According to St Matthew. The theme was that it is very easy to criticise, to find fault and condemn other people, but that doing so seldom gets them on your side. Constant criticism doesn't usually make people better. Our task as Christians is to introduce people to the person of Jesus Christ so that, in contemplating Him, their characters may be transformed by His character.

January 28th

Jeremiah 9 vv 12-16

We need wise people to guide us through our difficulties, but where is wisdom to be found. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. I'm sure that political, economic, military, scientific, artistic and all other kinds of skills are only any use if exercised in the fear of the LORD.

January 29th

Jeremiah 9 vv 17-26

Centuries later, St Paul will take us theme. There's no point in glorying in wealth, power or worldly wisdom – even if these are the things most people consider most important. The only true glory is the glory of God and His glory is manifest in the shameful death of Jesus on the Cross.

Forbid it Lord that I should boast
Save in the Cross of Christ my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

January 30th

Jeremiah 10 vv 1&2

The Babylonians were enthusiastic astrologers. Given their wealth and military might, the people of Judah might have thought that the Babylonian religion had the right idea about things. It is extraordinary that in the C21 there are still millions of intelligent, well-educated people who seem to believe in astrology. It is God Who determines what happens – not the stars, balls of fire millions of light years away from us. The only sensible way to live is to live in faith, thanking God for what we have, praying for what we need and endeavouring, by His grace, to live in accordance with His commandments.

January 31st

Jeremiah 10 vv 3-16

Not only were the Babylonians into astrology, but they were also idolaters as most people in the ancient world were. They made their own “gods”. They could have their own personal or national spirituality. To an extent, they could control their “gods”. They were, after all, nothing more than their own invention. False gods may not make many demands from you. On the other hand, there is nothing they can do for you.

February 1st

Jeremiah 10 vv 17-22

You may have seen a few weeks ago the controversy about the Kent clergyman who objected to the unsuitable music so many people choose for funerals these days. Some people agreed with him. Others (predictably) said effectively that if the Church does not give people what they want, people will vote with their feet and there soon won't be a Church. Pastors are under huge pressure to give people what they want. We are nice guys who like to please! We also realise that we cannot continue without the support and financial contributions of our flock. On the other hand, what people want is not always good for them. Indeed, sometimes what people want is very bad for them and the faithful pastor will have to say so even if it makes his flock hate him. Personally what I believe pastors have to try to do is to get alongside people where they are (unsuitable music and all!) and to try to get them to advance towards better things. If we won't accept the imperfect, we shan't have anyone at all. If we're content with the imperfect, we shan't be any use to anyone.

February 2nd (Candlemas)

Jeremiah 10 vv 23-25

You see how we are utterly dependent on God. There is nothing we can do without Him. We are entirely reliant on His mercy.

Almighty and everliving God, we humbly beseech thy Majesty, that, as thy only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple in substance of our flesh, so we may be presented unto thee with pure and clean hearts, by the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

February 3rd

Jeremiah 11 vv 1-17

The idea of covenant is very important in the Bible. There is the covenant God made with the people when He delivered them from Egyptian slavery. He will be their God; they will be His people. When Moses read the people the book of the covenant which he had received from God, blood from the sacrificed animals was sprinkled both on the altar and on the people. God shows His faithfulness in every way. The people are meant to show their faithfulness by keeping God's perfect Law of Love, but, of course, they don't and consequences ensue. There is also the covenant with David that the son of David will be King for ever. In the New Testament, Jesus is the sacrifice and the priest. He is the altar and the book of the covenant. He is the Son of David, King for ever. The sprinkling of the Blood of Jesus both makes the atonement with God and sanctifies the people. He is our God and we are His people. The thing is to live up to what we are.

February 4th

Jeremiah 11 vv 18-23

The lives of the prophets prefigure the life of Jesus. In Him all prophecy is fulfilled. He is the Word of God and proclaims the Word definitively and for ever. He tells us to expect the world to treat those whom He sends the way the world treats Him. So it is not altogether surprising that Jeremiah finds the people of his home turning against him and feels like a lamb to the slaughter. A big difference is that (understandably) Jeremiah burns with the desire for revenge, whereas Jesus prayed, *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*

February 5th

Jeremiah 12 vv 1-4

I began these notes with the comment that Jeremiah is a very human prophet. We, too, often wonder why the wicked seem to prosper, while good people suffer. We may think that it is necessary to live like worldly people in order to get on in the world. If we think that the things of this world are most important, we may set aside the things of God in order to conform to the wishes of the world.

The answer is twofold. Things don't work out right in this world if we don't follow the Maker's instructions. Whether or not things work out in this world matters a good deal less than having a right relationship with God in this world and the next.

February 6th Accession of HM Queen

Jeremiah 12 vv 5-17

O God, who providest for thy people by thy power,
and rulest over them in love; Vouchsafe so to bless
thy Servant our Queen, that under this nation may
be wisely governed, and thy Church may serve thee
in all godly quietness; and grant that she being
devoted to thee with her whole heart, and
persevering in good works unto the end, may by thy
guidance, come to thine everlasting kingdom;
through Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord, who liveth
and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one
God, world without end. Amen.

Judah in Jeremiah's day is rotten from top to bottom. They suffer from weak and corrupt kings. Princes are over mighty and arrogant. Pastors, priests and professional prophets are unwilling to make a stand for what is right. People worship the things they have made. There is no concern for justice or charity.

The great hope of Christendom in general and the establishment of the Church of England in particular was that there would be a godly people with godly pastors under a godly monarch. Obviously, England has not lived up to the vision. We can only speculate as to whether things might have been much worse without that vision. Judging by what life

is like in non-Christian countries, I should say that they probably would have been. Now we are losing the vision, tending instead to favour a secular state and a multicultural society. I do not think we should just accept this shift without question.

February 7th

Jeremiah 13 vv 1-11

Prophets are messengers of the Word of God. They do not, however, only speak. They perform signs. Signs are like words (and indeed Sacraments) in that they effect what they signify. When God commissions His Church to proclaim His Word, when He commissions the Church to perform signs, when He instructs us to celebrate the Sacraments, it is not a matter of mere words. These are the Word of God and God's Word does not return to Him void.

February 8th

Jeremiah 13 vv 12-27

We've all seen TV pictures of city streets plagued by binge drinking. (Mostly) young men and women abandon their dignity as human beings in a vain effort to cover over the enormous hole in lives from which faith in God is missing. They turn to sex rather than fidelity in a desperate attempt to find satisfaction. It is almost impossible to reason with them and to persuade them to be open to the knowledge of God. The result is damage to the health of the drunkards, civil disorder and crime, the breakdown of family life and of community. The only answer is the one that by and large society rejects – to return to the Lord.

February 9th

Jeremiah 14 vv 1-6

Again we've seen TV pictures of drought-stricken landscapes, mostly in Africa. Are droughts natural disasters? Some people blame global warming for the present drought in Kenya and they blame global warming on our greedy materialism, selfishly burning fossil fuels as if there were no tomorrow. Water shortages could often be alleviated by the digging of wells or by irrigation systems, but those who have the money don't care enough about the poor. Maybe the money is just never provided or maybe it is squandered by inefficiency or stolen by corrupt people in positions of power. Drought and famine may follow when war disrupts the infrastructure or the young men are drafted into

the army instead of working in the fields and factories. Drought and famine could often be avoided if we worked in harmony with God and with nature and with one another.

February 10th

Jeremiah 14 vv 7-12

It seems that the situation has gone too far even for prayer. How can that be? Are the sins of Judah unforgivable? Is it that their repentance is insincere? Or is this hyperbole or exaggeration – God letting them think that the case is hopeless in order to make them see how desperate the situation is so that they sincerely repent and can be saved?

Prayer is really about aligning our will with God's Will. When we pray, we are not reminding God of something He might have forgotten, suggesting ways to deal with a situation which He might not have thought of, or asking Him to change His Mind. What we are doing in prayer is so to align our will with God's Will that our prayers become part of the process by which God's Will is put into effect. Our prayers are necessarily naïve. We can only talk to God in human terms. I am sure that, if we think that something is right, it is right for us to pray for it. Conversely, if we feel unable to pray for God's blessing on something, we ought to wonder why we should want it so much! I talk to God about everything, great and small, cheerfully asking Him for what I think is right and I am sure that He hears and answers, but I would be very foolish if I ever asked Him to do what I want rather than what He wants!

Maybe the people of Judah had got to the point of asking but had not got to the point of submitting to God.

February 11th

Jeremiah 14 vv 13-16

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

So I begin most sermons. It is not the preacher's task to give the congregation his own views about things. Neither is it his job to tell them what they want to hear. The preacher's task is to proclaim the Word of God. Having been called by God and ordained by the Church, he ought to be able to do this if he humbly and prayerfully meditates on the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church and seeks to see how they

apply to the congregation and wider society in the contemporary world. A faithful preacher ought therefore to be listened to with respect and an unfaithful preacher ought to resign or be sacked. No human being, however, is infallible and the congregation too are part of the process of determining the Word of God, as they prayerfully measure the preacher's words against their own knowledge of Scripture and personal experience of God.

Catholics used to believe that something supernatural happened in Holy Communion. Protestants used to believe that something supernatural happened when the Word of God was preached. Anglicans are supposed to believe both! But I do wonder if the people who think they can miss coming to Church feel like this because they have lost sight of the supernatural. They are coming, they think, to listen to a lecture and to eat and drink a small quantity of bread and wine. I suppose it doesn't seem much to miss out on.

February 12th

Jeremiah 14 vv 17-22

These verses remind us of the horror of war and military defeat. We should not forget. They are going on in the world today. They happened in Europe within living memory. They could happen again. The devastation a nuclear war would cause hardly bears thinking about.

At last, when it is too late, the people realise that it is not the work of their own hands that can save them, but only the living God. That is something our own generation needs to remember too. So we need to pray for peace, aligning our wills with the Will of the Prince of Peace, and working with Him for peace in our hearts, peace in our homes and communities, peace in our nation and peace in the world.

February 13th

Jeremiah 15 vv 1-9

Some of you might need a bit of help with the references here. These warnings of the horrors of war and disorder come in the reigns of the poor kings Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, who follow in the chaos at the end of the reign of the good King Josiah. Josiah was the grandson of Manasseh. (His father Manasseh only reigned a couple of years.) Manasseh reigned a very long time and was notorious as a very

bad king. The thought is that the corruptions which go back to the reign of Manasseh are responsible for the bloodshed and chaos in Jeremiah's generation. Moses and Samuel had a great reputation as intercessors. (See Psalm 99.) Things were so bad, however, that even their prayers could not avert disaster. Think Northern Ireland. Think Afghanistan. Think the Middle East in general. The sins of the fathers are terribly visited on subsequent generations as people refuse to forgive or to forget things that happened centuries previously and refuse to trust the descendants of those who supposedly wronged their ancestors. Sincere prayer. A readiness to forgive. A preparedness to take the risk of trusting. All these things are needed if cycles of violence are to be broken.

February 14th (Quinquagesima)

Jeremiah 15 vv 10-21

For some reason it appeals to my weird sense of humour that this year the Church is keeping Quinquagesima, a date with a hard name which very few people know the meaning of, on the day when the world at large is supposedly celebrating a Christian saint, Valentine, though nobody knows much about Valentine and Christian worship doesn't feature too highly in the way most people celebrate his feast.

Coincidentally the prayer book collect for Quinquagesima is:

O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth: Send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before thee: Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

Charity is of course one translation of the NT word agape ἀγάπη, often translated love. God is agape and the great commandments are to agape Him and our neighbour. Some people would say that what people mostly celebrate on 14th February is what the Greeks would call eros eros, the word from which we get *erotic*. It is my belief, however, that true love between a man and a woman must contain a big helping of agape and that any agape love of God and/or neighbour must include

some element of passion or feeling. Otherwise it would be *as cold as charity!*

Jeremiah is passionate in today's reading. He is cross with God, as we are all sometimes cross with people we love. Jeremiah is sure that he is doing the right thing and leading a god-fearing life and yet he is in deep trouble. What, he demands of God, are You playing at? God promises that He will look after Jeremiah, as He looks after all of us, but certainly does not promise us trouble free lives.

February 15th

Jeremiah 16 vv 1-9

A time to weep and a time to laugh,
A time to mourn and a time to dance.

Jeremiah's is not the time for either. It is pointless to marry and to have a family because everything will shortly be destroyed. Soon there will be so many dead that people will be too overwhelmed to carry out the funeral rites and maybe too numb to care.

We hear in the news from Afghanistan about weddings and funerals accidentally shot up by troops believing them to be gatherings of hostile tribesmen. These events are tragic enough. What was about to happen to Jeremiah's Jerusalem was worse still. Normally people are careful to respect the dead bodies of their comrades. Normally the birth rate increases in time of war. The self-inflicted destruction of Jerusalem will overturn even these norms of human behaviour.

February 16th

Jeremiah 16 vv 10-21

The sense of this passage is by now familiar enough to us. The people of Judah have brought disaster upon themselves by abandoning the one true God and worshipping their own handiwork. Human beings were made in the image of God and it is only in Him that we can flourish.

Because of what they have done, after the siege, many of them will be exiled to Babylon. Vv 15&16 sound the note of hope, however. Despite everything, God will not abandon them. He will bring their descendants back from Babylon as He brought their ancestors out of Egypt all those centuries before.

February 17th

Jeremiah 17 vv 1-8

Today the government announced that sex education would be compulsory for 15 year olds. There would be no opt out on religious grounds. This has angered Roman Catholics and Moslems and other people as well. The government assurance was that faith schools could carry on teaching what their faith teaches about sex outside marriage, homosexuality, contraception, abortion, etc., but that all children must be taught the national curriculum. My understanding of this is that multiculturalism is all very well in the government's view, but that they intend to impose their secular ethic on all young people, i.e. that anyone can have sex with anyone provided that they use a condom and that any unwanted child can be aborted and that more traditional or religious ideas about fidelity, the sanctity of life and the sacredness of the union between a man and a woman should be regarded only as an optional extra. I fear that the Church of England is going along with the government too easily on this as on so many things.

It is interesting, isn't it, that in Jeremiah infidelity to God is regarded as the root of all the nation's problems. Because they worship false gods, the people of Judah have become selfish, dishonest, violent, indifferent to the needs of others and immoral. Because of this, their society is collapsing around them. Whereas, modern commentators tend to assume that religion is an optional extra and that people may freely choose any religion they like, but that all the important decisions about foreign policy, social policy, public morality, economic policy, etc., have to be taken without any reference to God. I wonder who is right, the prophet Jeremiah or the leader writers in the "quality" press?

February 18th

Jeremiah 17 vv 9-14

V9 is traditionally popular with preachers when they want to emphasise the sinfulness of humanity. The shock of this is another example of how far we have drifted from our Christian roots. For centuries, the Church has taken it as given that human beings are inherently sinful. Since Adam and Eve we have rebelled against God. We deserve to be damned. We cannot help ourselves. Only God in His Mercy can save us through the Sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. In the last few decades, however, we have all become rather more humanist. We assume that

babies are born good or at least that their minds are a morally neutral blank slate. If they turn out bad, it is this wicked world which has corrupted their original innocence. We are not, therefore, to be blamed. The last Judgment is not to be taken seriously because there are no moral absolutes, nobody's sins are his own fault and, if there is a good God and there is a Heaven, surely God must make sure that everybody gets there.

We could look at what the Church calls "original sin" from a scientific angle, however. Babies are born selfish. They have to be in order to survive. They demand their parents' attention. They make sure they are not neglected relative to their brothers and sisters. They learn to stand up for themselves and their rights in the nursery and the playground. They form alliances with siblings and friends against the world. We are born selfish and quite a lot of what passes for altruism (concern for others) is in fact a tactic for getting others to treat us well because we treat them well. Human beings are basically selfish from birth and selfishness is sin. To be like God is to give up self and self-giving is the only price sufficient for us to gain eternal life. Eternal life is available to us selfish human beings only because Jesus gives Himself on behalf of us all. Baptised into Christ, we are crucified with Him and then, paradoxically, find ourselves at last set free to live eternal, truly human, God-like lives of self sacrifice. But what do we suppose happens to those who remain selfish up to the end and reject what Christ has done for them? Would a self-negating God overrule their free choice and compel them to go to Heaven?

February 19th

Jeremiah 17 vv 15-18

The people of Judah just don't believe Jeremiah. And Jeremiah complains to God about his lot. It's no fun being a spokesman nobody listens to. But, of course, there is no point in being a preacher who tells people what they want to hear if what they want to hear isn't true.

February 20th

Jeremiah 17 vv 19-27

Keeping the Sabbath would be an expression of trust in God. We believe that we can only survive if we work 24/7 because we don't trust God to order our lives and to provide for us. Failing to keep the

Sabbath leaves with no time for God because all our time is taken up with the things of this world. And that is disastrous because *man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*

February 21st

Jeremiah 18 vv 1-10

Years ago I remember a children's service where the rector had got in a real live potter to demonstrate this story. God's Word is not only to be found in words written on a page or words spoken by our lips. God's Word is manifest in actions, in signs and sometimes in wonders.

February 22nd

Jeremiah 18 vv 11-17

Just as the clay is in the hands of the potter to do with as he will, so human beings are in the Hands of God. Jeremiah warns of calamity and begs the people to return to God. The people (some of them) see disaster coming and decide that there is no hope. They can only carry on relying on their false gods. So they are neglecting the only thing that could help them and they are as stupid as a very thirsty man who drinks gin instead of water. People look at their own problems. We look at the problems of our nation and of the world. Where can we find wisdom? Economics and the market? Military might? Social policy? Tolerance of diversity? Working harder? A new pension plan? All these things may have their part to play. The wise man or woman might well look at them all. But it will not do to forget that *the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.* Whatever measures we may need to take in worldly terms we cannot even begin to solve our problems unless we return to the Lord.

February 23rd

Jeremiah 18 vv 18-23

Different people tell us different things about what is right. They have different prescriptions for healing the nation, different ideas about how to make the Church grow. How do we recognise the true preacher or teacher, the truly wise counsellor? It isn't always easy to be sure who is right, but I am quite sure of this. We measure any preacher, teacher, politician or pundit by what we already know from Holy Scripture. We ponder their words prayerfully and in the light of the consistent teaching of the Church through the ages and throughout the world.

February 24th

Jeremiah 19 vv 1-15

The Valley of the son of Hinnom was a place where they sacrificed their children. Teaching about other religions in state schools often implies that religions do not differ from one another about anything important and that, therefore, we hold in common with other faiths everything that really matters and we should be tolerant of the differences, which do not matter much anyway. There are, it is assumed, no absolute truths in theology or ethics except that tolerance is the universal good. Religion is, however, an extremely potent force. False religion enables men and women to feel justified in perpetrating great evil. There is such a thing as Truth. We must, indeed, be humble as we seek for Truth and respect others who sincerely come to other conclusions, but we cannot give up and just accept that anything goes. If we do, we can expect that our civilisation will end as disastrously as pre-Exilic Judah.

February 25th

Jeremiah 20 vv 1-6

One of the peculiarities about people is that they so often think that by shutting up the messenger they can make uncomfortable truths go away. How often do people refuse to confront the truth – whether a sick person refusing to acknowledge an illness, a banker refusing to see the risk in a given investment, a politician who acts as though awkward statistics would disappear so long as the newspapers don't publish them? We cannot do anything about our problems until we accept their reality. Then we can take them to the Lord in prayer and take any action necessary: see the doctor about that tumour; adopt a sensible mortgage policy; make the necessary cuts in public spending.

February 26th

Jeremiah 20 vv 7-18

Jeremiah wishes he wasn't a prophet, but he finds he can't help himself. The Word of God bubbles up inside him. Preachers and indeed artists often say they experience something like that. Maybe, at times, we all feel that we must do or say something. It may be that we are impelled by God. You obviously have to be careful. Not every feeling we get comes from God. We need to test what we believe it is our duty to say or do against what we know of God from the Bible and the Church, but sometimes it is the authentic Voice of God telling us what to do.

February 27th

Jeremiah 21 vv 1-14

King Zedekiah did try. He knew that Jeremiah was right, but he was too weak to impose his will on the nation. The princes and noblemen were too powerful for Zedekiah and he was unable to follow Jeremiah's counsel which was that, by this time, it was too late to avoid military defeat and the only sensible thing to do was to surrender. Babylonian victory was inevitable. It was within the providence of God.

Many Christians are pacifists, believing that war can never be justified, but most Christians do believe that sometimes war is unavoidable and the only right course of action in a crisis. They have formulated the doctrine of a Just War – which unsurprisingly focuses on the justice of the cause, protection for non-combatants, etc. – but, more surprisingly, it also includes a clause about having a realistic chance of victory. Even in a just cause, it is not right to bring about all the suffering of war if there is no prospect of the right side winning.

February 28th

Jeremiah 22 vv 1-9

People had put their trust in the fact that the Temple, the House of God, was in Jerusalem. This outward sign, however, meant nothing unless, from the king downwards, the people acted justly and mercifully. If they truly worshipped Yahweh, they would keep His perfect Law of love. If they worshipped the works of their own hands, they would centre on themselves and quickly become arrogant, selfish, dishonest, greedy, violent and heartless. In that case, having the Temple would not save them. On the contrary it would be one of the many things destroyed in the Judgment.

March 1st

Jeremiah 22 vv 10-12

Just to confuse us, Shallum is another name for King Jehoiachin. The story so far is that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians have once defeated Judah and taken some of the population into exile in Babylon. Among the exiles is King Jehoiachin (Shallum) a young man who only reigned a few months after the death of his father Jehoiakim (son of the good King Josiah). Eventually, Jehoiachin would be treated as an honoured guest in Babylon. Meantime, however, Nebuchadnezzar makes Zedekiah (Jehoiachin's uncle) king in Jerusalem. Zedekiah is

too weak to control the nobles. They continue the bad practices which led to the disaster and incredibly foolishly rebel against the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar returns, destroys the Temple, the wall and much of the city, horribly executes Zedekiah's family, takes Zedekiah prisoner in chains and transports many more of the better class of people to Babylon. But the exiles are finally better off than those who die in the siege or get left to scratch a living among the ruins.

March 2nd

Jeremiah 22 vv 13-30

The Old Testament is comfortable with reasonable prosperity. Prosperity can be seen as a blessing from God. Extreme poverty is a disaster and the better off quite clearly in the Bible have a responsibility to look after the poor. Given the principle of tithing, if everybody gives a tenth to the LORD, the rich obviously give more than the poor, but they also get to keep more than the poor. There is no demand for equality. However, extreme wealth in the OT appears to be as dangerous as extreme poverty. Either can distract a man from following God. The rich man who does not care enough to provide for the poor or who, worse still, grows richer by exploiting the poor is in big trouble. I guess that we would do well to run our society on similar lines.

March 3rd

Jeremiah 23 vv 1-8

In ancient Israel people in authority were seen as shepherds or pastors. Just as a shepherd takes care of the flock, the king and the leading citizens are responsible for the well-being of the people – protecting them, feeding them, keeping them healthy. Again I guess it would be well if those with wealth and/or power in the modern world regarded themselves as responsible for the whole country, for all the people including the less powerful and the poor. God is the true Shepherd and all the under shepherds (prophets, priests and kings, etc.) are answerable to Him, from Whom all wealth and power come. The failure of these human shepherds (prophets, priests and kings, etc.) in Jeremiah's Judah means that God will take back the pastorate to Himself and replace these failures. He will bring back the flock scattered by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. As Christians, we see a prophecy here of Jesus the Good Shepherd Whose flock will come from all nations.

March 4th

Jeremiah 23 vv 9-32

Divorce used to be very difficult in English Law. The desperate rich would get an Act of Parliament in order to effect a separation. Poor people might just separate without benefit of lawyers. Then came the notion of the matrimonial offence. You could get a divorce through the courts if your spouse committed a matrimonial offence – nearly always adultery. There would then be a guilty party and an injured party and, naturally, the injured party might expect more favourable treatment with respect to alimony or custody of any children. Later on divorce law came to recognise that there are reasons other than adultery for matrimonial breakdown and that it is often unrealistic to claim that one party is guilty and the other innocent. So we had the no fault divorce. Moreover, alimony and child maintenance came to be seen as more about providing for the needs of the estranged parties and any children than as punishment for the guilty or compensation for the wronged spouse. All this fits in with our modern notions of being non-judgmental. “There are no moral absolutes and, even if there were, it is not for us to condemn other people.”

There are many good reasons for welcoming these changes. It does seem wrong, however, that a blameless man’s wife may commit adultery, but that the court will decide that the children are better off living with her in the old matrimonial home and that the husband must still pay the mortgage, so that he is, in effect, forced to provide a home for his ex wife’s new lover. The notion of no fault divorce seems too to have devalued the institution of marriage to the point where marriage vows are regarded as provisional, rather than binding. There is the prenuptial agreement deciding in advance what to do when the divorce comes. Moreover adultery seems to be regarded as no big deal any more.

Yet the Bible equates adultery with apostasy – infidelity to your husband or wife with infidelity to your God. Divorce is much the same thing as abandoning your religion. Adultery and apostasy are taken very seriously in the Bible and in most of human history. Such strictness has caused much suffering for those unable to get out of a failed marriage or persecuted for a change of religious allegiance, but I

do wonder whether our modern laxity with reference both to marriage and to faith can really sustain a coherent community.

March 5th

Jeremiah 23 vv 33-40

The official religious spokesmen have become so used to telling people what they want to hear and the people have become so used to hearing what they want to hear that it is no longer possible for the congregation of Israel to receive the Word of the LORD. This must always be a danger for any Church which identifies with a particular empire, nation or culture.

March 6th

Jeremiah 24 vv 1-10

If I remember rightly, we were taught about these two baskets of figs in the same church where we learned about the potter and the clay. If I am right, I am thinking back 40 years to when I was a teenager. The rector must have been very keen on Jeremiah as I am not sure that I remember anything else! The point is that the exiles in Babylon are the ones who prosper. Their faith is maintained and eventually they return to inherit the land. Those who stay in Jerusalem with Zedekiah are a bad bunch who won't repent and suffer complete disaster in the end.

March 7th

Jeremiah 25 vv 1-14

You will notice that the Book of Jeremiah flits around time wise. It is also partly in poetry (Jeremiah's prophesies) and partly in prose (the narrative, history and connecting parts). It is not like a modern textbook, novel or biography. This section summarises the fact that things are working out just as Jeremiah said they would. The point about the 70 years till the Restoration is that the land will enjoy its Sabbaths. The Jews were supposed to allow one year in seven as a Sabbath year, a year when the land would lie fallow. The fields would rest and regain their fertility. The wild animals would find food. The poor could glean. By not working for gain all the time, the people would acknowledge that the LORD would provide. They have, however, not kept these Sabbaths. They did not trust God. They were avaricious for gain. They have exploited the poor and the planet. Now the land will lie fallow against their wishes and catch up with its Sabbath rest. Any modern parallels?

March 8th

Jeremiah 25 vv 15-38

Just as it was taken for granted that adultery was shameful and therefore an appropriate parallel for apostasy, so it is taken for granted that drunkenness is shameful and therefore an appropriate parallel for the downfall of all these nations in an orgy of violence and bloodshed. I don't think it is just because I am getting old that I despair when I see these pictures of teenagers and young adults binge drinking and engaging in casual sex. Such shameful behaviour demeans their humanity and they become a "type" of the dissolution coming on western culture.

I don't say this to gloat or to condemn. I think I can honestly say that *there, but by the grace of God, go you and I*. You and I were privileged to be brought up in a society where Christian standards were the norm. If we did those things we were ashamed and we knew the consequences. We didn't need *drugs and sex and rock and roll* to fill the void in our lives because we lived in stable loving families in proper communities where Church was very much part of our lives. Schools and officialdom in general supported Christian family life as the norm. Even if our homes weren't like this or we personally went off the rails, the whole apparatus of society was there to bring us back. That is no longer the case for so many young people and it is our responsibility as Christians to make sure that they do have the opportunity to discover what they are truly worth as people through a knowledge of the love of Jesus.

March 9th

Jeremiah 26 vv 1-24

The authorities wanted to get rid of Jeremiah because they didn't like him telling the truth. Those who supported Jeremiah pointed out that Israel had a tradition of listening to the unpopular prophet and sometimes even took notice of what he had to say. Micah the Morasthite got away with criticising Hezekiah and everybody had benefited. Urijah was less fortunate! I'm ashamed to note how our own government in the last few years has sometimes dealt with whistleblowers, critics and even members of parliament who have told unpalatable truths. Silencing honest critics is no way to govern successfully.

March 10th

Jeremiah 27 vv 1-11

V3 refers to the other small nations around Israel. The point is that the mighty Babylonian army was about to conquer all the lands west of the Mediterranean and north of Egypt. Resistance was futile and the court soothsayers, prophets and wise men who pretended otherwise were simply deceiving their employers – telling them what they wanted to hear, rather than the truth. The LORD is in charge not only Israel, but throughout the world, and in His providence, Babylon's time of greatness had come.

March 11th

Jeremiah 27 vv 12-22

Notice that Jeremiah expects the priests to have real influence.

Christendom was much more like the Old Testament than the New. In the Old Testament, everybody in Israel notionally belongs to the people of God. The king is regarded as God's viceroy and senior religious figures have great power and influence. This was the model for the late Roman Empire, mediaeval Europe and protestant kingdoms such as ours which experienced the Reformation. Just read the C of E prayer book! By contrast, in NT times, the Church was a persecuted minority and the people of God were quite distinct from the people of the world. Maybe we are drifting back towards a more NT state of affairs, when Christians will be a minority in a secular state in which the Church has no more influence than any other interest group. If there were space, we could list advantages to being a relatively powerless minority and advantages to being in a position to ensure that the world is run on Christian principles. What I personally find hard to understand is that we seem to have moved from one model to the other in the space of about 50 years without any discussion of what we have done.

Government spokesmen refer to this as a secular state while our head of state is still supreme governor of an established church and crowned at an intensely religious ceremony, while bishops still sit in the Lords and the Commons not only begins with daily prayers but still ultimately determines the prayers to be said in parish churches.

March 12th

Jeremiah 28 vv 1-17

It can be a difficult job to determine the true prophet. Maybe we should start by being suspicious of the message which is too comfortable.

March 13th

Jeremiah 29 vv 1-23

Jeremiah writes to the exiles in Babylon and to commit themselves to Babylon's welfare. They are not to believe the false prophets who tell them that their captivity will be of limited duration. But God will be with them. When they turn to Him, they will experience His blessing.

Christians sometimes think of us as being like these exiles in Babylon. We live in the world. We may not be going to Heaven any time soon. We try to live as good citizens in the world, while knowing that our true homeland is in Heaven.

March 14th

Jeremiah 29 vv 24-32

The letters go to and fro between the exiles in Babylon and those still living under Zedekiah in Jerusalem. Influential Jews in Babylon don't like the messages Jeremiah is sending to the exiles. So they write to influential Jews in Judah to get them to shut him up! They haven't learnt! However, the message is from God and those who try to stifle the Word of the Lord will come to a sticky end.

March 15th

Jeremiah 30 vv 1-24

As we shall see if we read to the end of the book, Jeremiah will die in Egypt, but his message is for the future. Despite everything, God will restore His people. What they need is to return to Him in their hearts. When they are open to His grace, they will return to the Holy Land. They will be His people and He will be their God. Jeremiah's messages are to be written down for those times. This may be the beginning of our Book of Jeremiah. If so, of course, these prophecies have been around for 2,500 years and are still blessing the people of God today as you and I read them.

March 16th

Jeremiah 31 vv 1-14

Centuries before Jeremiah, God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt to live in the Promised Land. Soon after Jeremiah's time He will bring home the exiles from Babylon and elsewhere. 500 years after Jeremiah, God will send Jesus on the mission to call people of every nation home to Him. At some future date, heaven and earth will pass away, the Lord will return and all God's people will come to their eternal home.

March 17th

Jeremiah 31 vv 15-17

Rachel was one of Jacob's wives, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. She was, in a sense, the mother of Israel. She died centuries before the time of Jeremiah and her tomb is near Bethlehem, not far from Jerusalem. You can still see Rachel's tomb today and sadly it is still often the location of violence. Jeremiah pictures Rachel weeping for her children, the people of Israel, who will die at the hands of the Babylonians. He nevertheless promises hope. There will be restoration.

St Matthew's Gospel takes these words as a prophecy of Herod's massacre of the Holy Innocents in Bethlehem when Jesus is born. Salvation comes, but the road is often hard. Today is St Patrick's Day and, as we think of the wonderful things Patrick did and the glorious story of the Church in Ireland, we cannot but also remember the violence between Protestant and Catholic and the tortuous road to peace. We pray for the Irish churches (and our own) to live up to their vocation as followers of the Prince of Peace.

March 18th

Jeremiah 31 vv 18-30

Ephraim stands for the northern kingdom destroyed by the Assyrians decades before the Babylonians turned on the southern kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah trusts God to restore the north as well as the south. He receives this assurance in a dream and his sleep is sweet to him. This hope for reunification and restoration in the land of Israel expands with Jesus to encompass the whole of humanity so that human beings of every race may find their essential unity in the Body of Christ and their common citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven.

People have been blaming what has happened to Judah on what their parents and grandparents did wrong. There is some justification for this. Corruption had set in during previous reigns. The current generation did not, however, have to be bound by the past. They could have renounced their parents' errors and started again.

March 19th

Jeremiah 31 vv 31-34

What determines the way we behave? The rule book or our character? You can read the Bible as a set of rules. The world would indeed be a better place if people kept those rules. People won't keep those rules, however. Most people won't want to and, even if they did want to, they would find they couldn't. What really matters is character. A good character is formed by a good relationship with God. As you get to know God better, you become more like Him. God is love. So the closer you are to God, the more loving you become. If you love God and other people, you will discover that you keep the rules automatically. You have internalised the rule book.

[What follows is my personal opinion, not necessarily the teaching of the Church. It is my belief that we are experiencing growing levels of crime and antisocial behaviour despite the plethora of new regulations, extra powers for the police and intrusive surveillance of our every day lives, because the secular state has got things entirely the wrong way round. It is not interested in character formation, which is accomplished through faith, traditional family life and old-fashioned communities. The secular state downgrades all those influences on people, claiming to be value free, and then tries to impose order by a vast number of rules controlling every detail of our lives and watching us all the time to make sure we comply. I believe that such an approach is doomed precisely because it does not have the cooperation of the people it hopes to control. Guide Dogs for the Blind don't take wolf cubs, let them run wild for a year and then try to force them to act as guide dogs by a combination of rewards and punishments, relying on constant surveillance to make sure they do their duties and don't eat their masters. On the contrary guide dogs are selected from breeds known to enjoy working with human beings, brought up in loving families, where they learn to trust and cooperate with human beings, and are then given training which not only gives them the skills they need to help a blind person but also the self-discipline which ensures that (even when not under surveillance) they will put their owner's needs before their own wishes. So they will not race off to chase a cat, for example, when they are meant to be guiding an old lady across the road!]

March 20th

Jeremiah 31 vv 35-40

When your faith is weak, just think about the world God has made. If He can do all that, can't He look after little you?

March 21st

Jeremiah 32 vv 1-25

Put your money where your mouth is. Jeremiah's uncle wants to sell his field at Anathoth. After all, it is worthless in the light of the invasion and coming destruction. What's more, Jeremiah has his own troubles. He's in prison for sedition! So it is a real act of faith on Jeremiah's part to buy the field. He is really demonstrating his confidence that, despite his imprisonment and the war, God will restore the land of Israel.

People sometimes say that the last part of anyone to be converted is the pocket. Do we have enough faith to give generously of our money to the work of God?

March 22nd

Jeremiah 32 vv 26-44

On Easter Day, the services will be filled with joy. The churches will be beautifully decorated with flowers. I expect we shall have some good music. Everybody will do his best to celebrate the resurrection. But those who come at Easter without giving consideration to the events of Holy Week and Good Friday will have missed the point. To forgive sin is definitely not the same thing as to overlook sin. There is a glorious resurrection as there is restoration promised here for Israel, but it will not come without first facing up to sin and dealing with its consequences. In the case of Judah, those consequences were the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity. In our case, Jesus accepts the consequences of human sin in His Body on the Cross. Our salvation is priceless, but never mistake pricelessness for valuelessness.

March 23rd

Jeremiah 33 vv 1-18

The focus for the promise of restoration comes to be the Messiah, the descendant of King David. These prophecies and hopes underlie the New Testament. It is Jesus Who fulfils them not only for Israel but for the whole creation.

March 24th

Jeremiah 33 vv 19-26

Many people contrast the certainties of Science with faith, which is supposedly a matter of personal opinion. Science depends on observation of the world. (So it presupposes that it is possible to observe the world accurately, which is not quite so obvious when you come to think about the way we all see things differently!) It also finds pattern. One thing follows another. One thing seems to be caused by another. There is a pattern. So your observations enable you to propose laws from which you can predict how things will behave in the future. It will get light tomorrow morning at a time you can predict from your knowledge of the motion of the earth relative to the sun. Unfortunately, of course, you cannot prove cause and effect. Neither can you know that the sun will rise tomorrow. You believe it will because you have faith that that is the way the Universe is. You have faith in Nature!

In fact, God is the guarantor. He creates the Universe according to law. Scientific laws are His laws and He is the guarantor that they work. The scientist (whether or not he knows it) is investigating the mind of God. Moral law and God's plan for salvation are also guaranteed by God. He is the origin of prophecies and promises, of justice and mercy. They are just as certain (if not more certain) than scientific laws.

Ethics and Theology are much harder to do than Physics or Chemistry, but they are no less concerned with Truth!

March 25th (The Annunciation)

Jeremiah 34 vv 1-22

The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt and God had set them free. This knowledge was supposed to inform the way they themselves behaved. They were not to enslave their fellow Israelites. The freedom God had brought them was something to be shared. In the same way, our status as redeemed sinners, as people set free from death, ought to determine our conduct towards other people – to treat them with the generosity with which God treats us and to share with them the Good News of His Salvation.

March 26th

Jeremiah 35 vv 1-19

These Rechabites were committed to a Bedouin purity. They would not settle. Settlement is often associated with sin when communities grow too big to care about the welfare and behaviour of individuals. They lived in tents. They drank no alcohol. They preserved their way of life over many generations. Probably other people thought they were a bit peculiar. Maybe they were fanatical. But at least they kept faith. When they had to take shelter in the city because Nebuchadnezzar's army was pillaging the countryside they still refused wine. These fanatics kept faith with their own peculiar understanding of religion. Why couldn't normal people keep faithful to mainstream religion? How come cults and extreme sects flourish, when Anglicans and Methodists can no longer be bothered?

March 27th

Jeremiah 36 vv 1-19

We're going back a few years to the time before the Babylonian invasion when Jehoiakim was still king. Jeremiah's warnings were just as unpopular then and he had to go into hiding. God told him to write down the prophecies and Baruch, who couldn't have been lacking in courage, read them out in public. The more sensible members of the nobility realised the importance of what Jeremiah had written and decided to bring it to the attention of the king.

March 28th

Jeremiah 36 vv 20-32

This is an impressive story. You can imagine the arrogant king burning each page of the book he doesn't want to hear read. Then he orders the arrest of the author and "publisher". How many tyrants since have burnt books and imprisoned or executed their authors? The pen is mightier than the sword. As we said earlier, "Words, reason, ideas do, in the end, matter far more than physical force. You can't quench the spirit." It is hard to quench the human spirit and you certainly cannot quench the Spirit of God. The story simply ends with Jeremiah writing out more prophecies! Most people have heard of Jeremiah and know something about him, but there are not so many who remember King Jehoiakim. If we are faithful in proclaiming the Word of God we can be confident that the Word will not return to Him void.

March 29th

Jeremiah 37 vv 1-21

Jeremiah is a very personal book. We get to see the difficulties the prophet himself faced. He had warned the people that Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians, but many refused to believe him. When Pharaoh sent an army up through the Holy Land, the Babylonians temporarily abandoned their siege and people thought that Jeremiah was discredited. The Egyptians would save them. Jeremiah knew this was a vain hope and had to tell the people so. He then thought he could take advantage of the respite to visit his home at Anathoth, but his enemies assumed that he was defecting to Babylon and put him in prison. The king sympathised with him, but was not strong enough to face down the popular clamour against Jeremiah, just as Pontius Pilate felt unable to support Jesus against the lynch mob and other blameless individuals have suffered because weak governments have given into popular prejudice. “Democracy”, as Churchill said, “is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” Democracy ought not to be about appeasing the mob but about enlisting the support of all of the people in the task of governing wisely and justly.

March 30th

Jeremiah 38 vv 1-13

This is one of the stories from the Book of Jeremiah which more people might know. It is a good story to tell children. It is a reminder of the way people may be persecuted for telling the truth. It is also a reminder that comparatively minor characters can have an important role in alleviating injustice. Apart from this story, how many people have heard of Ebed Melech the Ethiopian? It is salutary that, as so often in the Bible, it is the outsider who is most perceptive. This man is a servant and a foreigner, but he is the one who recognises that the prophet of the LORD ought not to be left to die in the pit! It ought to alert us to the need to listen to people who are not the obvious leaders of the Church or perhaps even members of the Church at all.

March 31st

Jeremiah 38 vv 14-28

Zedekiah knows that Jeremiah is telling the truth. He listens to him and learns that there is only one way to mitigate the disaster which is coming. If he surrenders, he will save the city from complete

destruction and he and his family and the people of Judah will receive better treatment at the hands of the Babylonians. He knows that Jeremiah is right, but he's afraid of the power of the nobles remaining in Judah and the mockery of those who are already in Babylon. So he listens to the Word of the LORD but does not act on it for purely worldly reasons. There are consequences.

I can think of a number of similar occasions in my ministry. People ask about faith. They seem impressed with what they hear. But they won't commit. They are too busy with the things of this world. Their friends will think they are strange if they go to Church. They like what the Church stands for, but they don't want to identify with the people who already belong. One distressed young man told me that he got as far as the church door because he thought that attending worship might help him with his personal problems, but he couldn't bring himself to go in, in case his mates saw him. The Word has to take root in our hearts if it is to bear fruit.

I am sorry that we shall not have time to finish the book this quarter. Please let me know if you would like to finish it another time or if you have any particular requests for books we might read together for these notes.

What happens afterwards is that the Babylonians do destroy the Temple and the city. The leading citizens are exiled to Babylon. Those who remain in Judah are to be ruled by a governor appointed by the Babylonians. Jeremiah turns down the offer of a nice home in Babylon to stay with the Jews in Judah because their situation is much more desperate. He counsels them to settle down under Babylonian rule, but, exhibiting incredible stupidity, they assassinate the governor and many of them decide to take refuge in Egypt. Jeremiah counsels them against this too, but, when they refuse to listen, he goes with them to be their prophet and pastor. The biblical story ends with Jeremiah living in Egypt. Tradition has it that he died a martyr's death.