Jeremiah 29 sermon GBC 7th April 2024

When was the last time you received a letter?

Not common these days, emails, texts etc. If I was wanting to relay some information to you in an email or letter and I wrote it all down, but you only chose to read parts of it, chances are the information would be misconstrued, or you might get a totally different understanding of that information. We tend to do this with letters in the bible, those from Paul and others.

Because of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us who follow Christ, God can use even a few verses, a few words from a letter to speak to us in personal and powerful ways.

It is useful sometimes to understand a few lines of a letter, a verse of the bible in the context of the whole letter. That is what we will attempt today.

As we read this letter, the direct words of God, through the prophet Jeremiah, I hope and pray God will reveal to us what He wants us to hear.

History, people of israel told to turn from idolatry etc or will be sent to Babylon.

A number of false prophets tried telling the people that its ok, it will only be for a couple of years, then god will restore us, stand strong, do not bow to neb…etc…

But Jeremiah refutes this, and warns against them, then in ch 28 specifically targets a prophet.. Hananiah… Hananiah telling people things that made them feel comfortable, that made things more palatable, v 15 of 28… “ Listen Hanahiah! The Lord has not sen you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies.

V 16 Therefore, this is what the Lord says. I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the lord… he died that year.

It must have been hard to hear, that God was going to send his people, israel to another nation, another country, another culture and use those foreigners for His glory… and tell israel to serve Neb.. so Hananiah I think was trying to appease peoples concerns, was saying what they wanted to hear. Which happens when people are fearful of an unknown future, we drift towards comfort.

God had other ideas, and they came through Jeremiah.

CH 29, a letter, to the leaders of Israel in exile, priests, prophets elders…everyone included… all the people.. a letter from God through Jeremiah.

V 5. Build houses settle, plant gardens

V 6 Marry and have sones and daughers, marry your children to Babylonians. Increase in number, do not decrease.

V7 Seek the peace and prosperity of the city. Pray to the lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

V8 Don’t listen to people saying otherwise, to those who might be saying, don’t get involved in Babylon, remain isralites.

V9. They are not from God.

V10, seventy years completed, bring them back..

V11, plans I have for you, to prosperand not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.

V12 Then you will call upone me and pray to me and I will lisent to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Goes on to talk about those still in Jerusalem saying not to serve Babylon and that the exile was a bad thing.

God used the nation of Babylon, as a tool to bring his people back to him, to bring them to a relaisation of what he wanted from them.

This was a tough pill to swallow for many and they preferred to listen to the men who were speaking against Babylon.

Even though God refers to Neb as ‘my servant’ this was Babylon, pagans, not Gods people, thought israel.

In a few weeks I will be spending some time in another culture, one where I don’t know what the food will be like, I cant speak the language, there will be customs and symbols that I wont understand the meaning of… I am doing this by choice.

Imagine, you’re a church, group of Gods people, and God sends an invading army of a totally different culture, takes you all off to live there.. in a strange place.

What would our response be?

It would be natural to want to hunker together, keep all the familiar things of our faith in tact. Get even closer to each other, build a new church, this is how we would survive as Gods people in a foreign culture.

In many respects, we as the Christian church in Australia, in Grange, are like Israel in this story.

We live in a culture that does not look like our own, church culture… Things we value are often not of value to those outside the church.

Language is often different, there are symbols and rituals we have that mean nothing to others…

It would be a reasonable response to be critical of this world around us and see church as our safe place…

Maybe stretching it, but I think this letter to the exiles has a few things we can find useful as we as Gods people, live daily in a world where he is not at the centre.

Idea I find is one of presence.

**Physical presence.**

V 5- Build houses, plant gardens. Put down permanent roots, your not here temporarily. Evidence that God wanted his people to be seen as residents… in this foreign land.. Gardens, takes time to produce food, maybe the food was quite different to what they grew in israel,… plant and eat…

Change your eating habits to fit with the community you are now part of. Take action that gives a sense if permanence… settle in for the long haul.

**Relational presence**.

V 6 Marry and have sones and daughers, marry your children to Babylonians. Increase in number, do not decrease.

Not many relationship deeper than that of a marriage, parent and grandparent. These were what God was telling his people to get involved in… indicator of how deeply involved with this foreign community He wanted them.

Think for a minute, marry into the locals, take them into your family. Some big changes, family dynamics would change, language learning, culture learning. New family connections in this new place. Not to mention the half Babylonian grandkids that are now on the scene.

Important because israels identity had big purity focus, remain israel, … God himself is changing that… by telling them how to live in Babylon… transforming them as a people and Babylon as a nation.

**Spiritual presence**

V7 Seek the peace and prosperity of the city. Pray to the lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

Seek their prosperity and pray for them.. .whoa… hang on God, these pagans, these non Israelites, you want us to not only be a physical presence, and a relational presence but pray for them, do things that make them better… big ask.

It is… but this is what God wanted for his people.

I don’t think this has changed, we are doing so much good work here at GBC in our community, I know for many they know its Gods heart that we serve our community , not for our benefit but for thiers, still something God wants for his people today.

Interesting, as we approach the famous verse 11.. that the prosperity of israel, seems almost conditional on how they are present in the community… if it prospers, so will you…

Great mindset to have, comes from God so of course, when I serve the community outside of my church and do things that contribute to making that community a better place, then we will be a better church..

Unfortunately I have experienced some churches that seem to embark on community ministries, with the understanding that it is primarily for their benefit, with the focus on filling pews… its also been my experience that these ministries often don’t work and don’t last..

So we are on the right track here at GBC, recent car park event, Halloween event, Christmas presents…go so far as to say, its transformative…

Our presence as Gods people leads to transformation

But we need to stay the path, be persistent, not give up.

V8 Don’t listen to people saying otherwise, to those who might be saying, don’t get involved in Babylon, remain isralites.

V9. They are not from God.

**Transformation**

V 10 when seventy years completed, I will fulfill my promise and bring you back.

Return to Jerusalem, Gods people in Gods city…but not as they were, totally transformed…

70 yrs , two, three generations, of doing what God commanded, living in Babylon, welcoming locals into their families, producing children, growing together.

Mostly bi lingual at least… Don’t know if physical looked different. Certainly new clothing habits perhaps, new diets, food preferences… very different from the people God sent from Jerusalem to Babylon.

They were transformed into something New… just as we are when we live for Christ, obey him, allow him to lead us.

They obeyed god, became a physical, relational and spiritual presence in Babylon and they were transformed.

As was the communities they lived in, Babylon.. praying for its prosperity, being involved deeply in families and communities…

Same today, when we are deeply involved as Gods people in our communities, when we love them, pray for them, live in them, get involved, when we are a meaningful presence. We are transformed, they are transformed… how God wants it..

**Presence and transformation are Gods plan for us.**

famous verse, V11, I know the plans I have for you, to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.

V12 Then you will call upone me and pray to me and I will lisent to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

I love the word of God, because through his HS he speaks to individuals from it, with what they need to hear at a particular time in their life.

I am sure this verse has been an encouragement to many.

Today, putting it back into the context of the letter, it is not a statement of individual prosperity of material wealth or even good times. It is a call to be involved, to care and love the communities we live in to be a presenence, to be transformational.

I have plans for you to prosper, v7 when they do, you do.. so goes to say that its Gods plan for us to live in ways that our community propsers, and when it does, so will we… His clear plan.

Newly transformed people, with a new understanding of God and community, now turn to him to pray, they have been obedient.

Back on track with who he wants them to be, listen to them.. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart…

With those hearts that are now transformed by God because of our obedience of Him in living out our presence, His presence through us, in our communities.

With hearts transformed by His love for others we may have thought unlovable.

With hearts transformed by His holy spirit, we received when we accepted Jesus as our lord and saviour and welcomed him into our hearts and our midst.

Great passage, letter to the exiles from God, delivered by Jeremiah… be a positive presence, physically, relationally, spiritually.

And God will transform our communities, and transform us to see him and worship him in new ways.

We are doing this well at GBC…opportunities.. for each person here to be involved…

He has a plan for us… … His presence a transformational presence …

Let us pray..