

Jeremiah 33:14-16 Sermon – 9.15am and 11am 29<sup>th</sup> Nov 2015

Picture the scene. It is Jerusalem and we're under siege by the mighty armies of Babylon. All around the walls are enemies. We can't go out, but we can't stay here. Something's got to give. There's no real hope. It's dark. The walls which were there for our safety begin to feel like they are closing in around us. The city on a hill seems to be sinking further and further into a great black hole of despair. There's no way out. There's no way out.

And worse, this is a problem of our own making. We are stuck in this hole because of the things we did, the things our friends did and the things that our leaders did. Our actions and our thoughts have come back to haunt us. And now our guilt cries out with our children's wails. Our culpability is equalled only by our shame and our disgrace. Finally found out. All those secret indiscretions and not just the secret ones either. The things we do wrong have a way of finding us out; and today, they have found us out big time.

And so we are lost; the so-called People of God about to be wiped off the map. It's not God's fault – he warned us, he entered into a covenant with us and we double-crossed him. We completely ignored our end of the bargain despite God's constant warning and encouraging and cajoling and pleading.

And so we are here. Surrounded by Babylonians. Starving and helpless. Stuck in a hole we cannot get out of. A hole which we dug and then fell into; every single one of us. Not one of us can claim we are innocent. Sure, there are some of us with dirtier hands than others, but isn't that always the case! Our broken path has led us downwards, ever downwards...

Our guilt is the sewage of life, flushed down our hole with us as we are trapped against the rising tide of Babylonian oppression. We have been on a self-destruct mission which will now end with the destruction of our Temple and the loss of our autonomy.

Then this prophet Jeremiah comes along and there is the chink of light for us. We can look up from the hopelessness of the pit and see a glimmer. And this glimmer is God. Even in this sad, sad time, there is hope.

(change position)

"The days are coming when I will fulfil the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety."

This talk of King David's line is all about the fact that the King in Jerusalem, borne of David's descent, is a symbol of God's Kingship and his rule. Even in this dark time, Jeremiah is saying that there is hope – God's Kingship, his rule and his justice will be returned and through that, the people of God will be blessed.

But what does this hope actually look like? It isn't some fairytale or sentimental expression of sympathy and solidarity. It is a real, credible vision of a future. God will restore the Davidic King and with him, God's Will will be done and his justice will restore us and judge Babylon, our oppressor. And this plan isn't just a pipe dream; it will happen through a mysterious figure who "will be called: The Lord our Righteous Saviour."

(Change position back again)

Suddenly there is hope in the darkness. Yes, the Babylonians will invade and capture Jerusalem, but there will be a reckoning. There will be a restoration. And light will return to us, the people of God. God will save the nation and restore it to himself. Despite the fact we have double-crossed his covenant with us, he will bring a saviour who will rescue us.

(change position again)

But what does this mean for us today in Ilkley?... (pause)

We all live, doing things we regret and not giving time to things we should. None of us are proud of every single thought and action we have, and none of us can claim to have put God, our creator, first in all aspects of our lives at all times. None of us have loved our neighbour as we love ourselves. We, like the citizens of Jerusalem, have all offended against God. We all wallow in the mud of our own holes, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. It reminds me of the story of little Timmy O'Toole, a boy who fell down a well. We'll watch the news report now...

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbhiLbT\\_yGo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbhiLbT_yGo)

OK, so not a real news report, but it lightened the mood a little!

So... we are all, like the people of Jerusalem, stuck in a hole, surrounded by the bad things we have done, even if I don't feel it. What do we do about it?

I'm sure you'll agree that none of the solutions in the Timmy O'Toole clip is really going to cut the mustard! The problem is that we are all stuck in the well and so we can't help each other. No-one is going to sing songs, send love or throw money at us from the top of the well because we are all stuck. No-one can send down a rope from the top of a well if they are stuck in it at the same time. I once ended up at the bottom of a cravass in the Alps, and it was only because there was someone at the top to help me that I eventually got out! We need someone at the top to rescue us from the pit of our mistakes. We need someone else to send their love down the well in a practical way. And this is what Jeremiah announces that God will do.

So what does it look like for us when God sends his love down the well? This is the first Sunday of Advent, the run up to Christmas. And when God sends his love to humanity, scraping around in the dirt of the bottom of each of our individual and collective wells, it looks like Jesus. Jesus looked like one of us – correct number of fingers and toes, and so on. When he was cut, he would bleed. He was a real human who lived a real life as one of us.

However, according to Jeremiah, he was also called, The Lord, our Righteous Saviour. Suddenly he looks less like one of us. For a start, he carries God's own name, translated "the Lord". He is "righteous" which means he isn't just being a good person, because even good people are stuck down their own pits of guilt and shame. Instead, we are talking about the perfect human – something never accomplished before; but which means that this Jesus can stand at the top of our wells and chuck down the rope and pull us out.

This means there's a rescue line dangling from above. We can look up and see the bright light of Jesus come to save us from our mess. The perfect human, come to save the rest of us. But not just a good man; Jesus is God himself come to dredge his creation back up from the mire they have got themselves into. At great personal cost, God pulls us up and cleans us off and we can see the sunshine. Despite the fact we are all guilty of offending God, he spent himself, in Jesus, to rescue us so he can bless us and so the world can be bright and filled with his justice.

We all, like Timmy O'Toole, are stuck and trapped by guilt and regret. Jesus' rescue line is dangling ready to be grabbed. If we trust God and accept his help and then the guilty mud will flow off us as we are raised up out of our pits. God, in Jesus has sorted the mess, so we don't have to.

And as we are lifted out of our pits, we see life afresh. No longer is it overshadowed by the past and no longer am I tortured by guilt in the present. I see clearly with fresh eyes and recognise that even though I didn't think my own personal hole was all that dark – I wasn't a terribly bad person - the view from above is so much brighter than I'd ever imagined. How do you explain the sunshine to someone who has never seen it? I can only point the way. Take the dangling rescue rope of Jesus, offered by the love of God, and follow him into a new life which shines brightly with the sparkle of creation and re-creation and in which I no longer need to trudge through the swamps of guilt or be embattled by the armies of shame and condemnation. Let's pray.

Thank you Jesus that you don't want anyone to be left in moral or spiritual debt to God or neighbour. Thank you that you came and lived among us and that you now stand ready to accept us as your followers, despite our pasts, our presents and despite that we will be imperfect in our futures too. Thank you that you want us to follow you with all our hearts and that you will, in return, keep your rescue rope ready to help us back up when we stumble. Amen.