

The Call

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 13th of June 2004.

The preacher is Rhys Besant. His sermon is entitled The Call and is based on Jeremiah chapter 1.

Some moments of crisis we can foresee, but there are other moments of crisis that we are blind to.

Some moments of crisis we can't foresee. We don't know that the bushfire or the flood is coming. We don't know the president is about to be assassinated.

We don't know that we or someone who's dear to us will be involved in a traffic accident. There are some moments of crisis that we can't foretell, but there are other kinds of crises which we can see looming.

[1 : 05] The failure of a marriage, preparations for war, a business not being able to pay its creditors. Some crises we should be able to foresee because all the signs are written large.

And the book of Jeremiah presents to us a crisis, a moment of no return that should have been foreseen by those who were closest to it.

The book of Jeremiah describes the crisis in the nation when the bottom falls away. Though it should have been plain for all to see.

In some sense they were blind. They couldn't see what God was doing amongst them. But though the book of Jeremiah as a whole describes a moment of crisis, the first few words of the book don't seem to portray something very desperate.

It looks like a settled life. From verse 1, the words of Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah, of the priests who are in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin.

[2 : 24] Jeremiah is fulfilling his role as a priest. It's a village life. Things are going on as they've always gone on. And it was to this Jeremiah in verse 2 that the word of the Lord came.

In the days of King Josiah, son of Ammon of Judah, in the 13th year of his reign. But the crisis, as it were, starts developing in our imagination because this word of the Lord didn't just come once but came repeatedly.

It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim, son of Josiah, and until the end of the 11th year of King Zedekiah, son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem.

Though King Josiah himself had been a reforming king and had tried to reform the life of the nation, those who followed him, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, were too influenced by the power of nations around them.

Though these first few verses look harmless enough, when we dig a bit deeper we discover that the crisis is looming.

[3 : 43] The captivity of Jerusalem is about to arrive. We can't begin to imagine the terror in those of the ancient world when Jerusalem fell.

For Jerusalem was meant to be God's stronghold in the world. This was the city that would never be defeated. God is in the midst of her. It shall not be moved. God will help it when the morning dawns. How can Jerusalem be taken?

Well, it's at this moment that the words of Homer Simpson come to mind. I'm not scared, but I know I should be because the music just changed.

This is a crisis in the life of the nation, a looming crisis. But who has really seen it?

Who has really accepted it? For when Jerusalem falls, it's the end of the temple, the end of sacrifices, the end of kings, the end of the nation and eviction from the land.

[4 : 47] It's not merely a sociological crisis. It's not merely a crisis of what will happen to the nation. The real question that people will have to face is, has God abandoned them forever? Can God do anything to bring them back?

Is there a future under God? God raises up Jeremiah.

This young and inexperienced man to be his spokesman, his prophet in these days of crisis. Look at the way that Jeremiah is commissioned by God.

The word of the Lord came to him and said, Verse 5, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I consecrated you.

I appointed you a prophet to the nations. Jeremiah is exactly, exactly the man for the moment. History is out of control, it seems.

[6 : 11] But Jeremiah is exactly the person whom God can use in this moment of crisis. And it's not that Jeremiah has the gifts. Nowhere here does God say, I've chosen you because you're gifted.

Gifts aren't what it's about for Jeremiah. God doesn't say, I've chosen you because you've done exactly the right kinds of leadership courses. I've chosen you, Jeremiah, because of the way you faithfully pray.

There's nothing in Jeremiah that God points to as a reason for him being chosen and commissioned.

It's before God formed him in the womb, God knew him. Before he was born, God consecrated him and appointed him a prophet to the nations.

The very DNA of Jeremiah, the very way he was knit together in his mother's womb, made him exactly the right man for the moment. God knew him intimately and made him, every part of him, just right.

[7 : 21] God knew him, every part of him, just right. God knew him, every part of him, just right. And took a long time to do it. Even from the moment he began to be knit together in his mother's womb.

What an encouragement for those of us who don't feel gifted. For those of us who don't feel like leaders. For those of us who don't feel particularly special.

The greatest gift you are to this church might be just who you are yourself. You yourself are God's gift to you.

You yourself are God's gift to this church. I'm not made for perilous quests, cried Frodo.

I wish I'd never seen the ring. Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen? Such questions cannot be answered, said Gandalf. You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess.

[8 : 29] Not for power or wisdom at any rate. But you've been chosen. And you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits.

Just as you have. God commissioned Jeremiah as a prophet.

Not just to Israel or Judah. But a prophet to the nations. This is really unusual because when God called Isaiah he sent him to Israel.

And when God called Ezekiel he sent him to the people of Israel in exile. But here amongst the major prophets unusually God asks Jeremiah not merely to speak to the nation but to speak internationally.

And bizarrely though the nation has not yet fallen. Babylon has not yet taken them.

[9 : 31] Despite that God is already getting ready for the next stage of ministry. God is getting ahead of himself preparing for beyond the crisis.

For in one sense it is the end of an era. Because Jerusalem is about to fall. But at another level it is the beginning of a whole new part of God's purposes for the world.

But Jeremiah argues back. He can't quite live with himself. He can't quite see that he would be the person that God wants to use.

He says Lord God truly I don't know how to speak. I'm only a boy. Or I'm inexperienced. Perhaps not meaning that he was particularly young. But God refuses to take that as an excuse.

And replies don't say I'm only a boy. For you shall go to all to whom I send you. And you shall speak whatever I command you. Don't be afraid of them. For I am with you to deliver you.

[10 : 41] You shall go. You shall speak. Don't be afraid. I am with you. And if you're a person who reads the scriptures.

Some parallels with Moses might be coming to mind. For Moses fought back. Moses refused to receive his commission from God. Moses pointed out his own inexperience particularly with words.

Moses prepared the people for entry into the promised land. By speaking these words from God. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from amongst their own people.

I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them everything that I command. For there are parallels between Moses and Jeremiah.

For just as Moses as it were marks the beginning of a new phase in God's purposes by bringing the people to the promised land. And so Jeremiah marks a new phase in God's work with his people.

[11 : 49] As God's own purposes become increasingly international. In lots of ways Moses gives us a model to understand what Jeremiah is meant to accomplish.

And Jeremiah accomplishes it. We learn in verse 9 by speaking. When Jeremiah opens his mouth.

What's he to say? Well two thirds of it is to preach destruction. Two thirds of it is to preach God's judgment.

Two thirds of it is to pluck up. To pull down. To destroy and overthrow. And one third of Jeremiah's message is to build and to plant. To set people's hopes beyond the moment of crisis.

But surely in all this is Jeremiah's confirmation that his preaching is to go beyond the bounds of Israel. For the nations and kingdoms of the world are in Jeremiah's sight.

[13 : 24] He once was this kind of insignificant priest in a small relatively insignificant village called Anathoth.

But with this moment of commissioning he's been thrust forward to be the one who confronts not only the nation but the nations as well.

He thought he was just an insignificant bystander. Actually he's God's man to confront the power politics of his own day.

Like Truman. In the Truman Show. He thought that his life was pretty average. Pretty normal.

Pretty settled. Pretty middle class. Until he realised that from his infancy he'd been the star of a much bigger show. And God the director of Jeremiah's life makes him the mouthpiece for him who wants to address all the nations of the world.

[14 : 42] And when you became a Christian you might well have been like me and been acutely aware of your failings or your sins or your shortcomings or your need.

And rightly so because in becoming a Christian your own sins have been forgiven. In becoming a Christian you've understood God's provision of power for new life.

But actually in becoming a Christian it slowly dawns on us that God's placed me more than just in a local church. He's made me part of an international fellowship.

While at first when I became a Christian I thought it was all about me. In time I realised that becoming a Christian is God making us part of his international work of world reconstruction.

We are world Christians. We find ourselves caught up in this great purpose that God has not just for me but for us.

[15 : 56] For his people in all times and in all places. But we find lots of excuses to avoid God's big purposes for the world.

We ask ourselves what do I have to offer? I don't get a time to read the paper. I don't understand what's going on in the Middle East. I'm not good at challenging those in authority in this land or in other lands because of their injustice or because of their lack of righteousness.

I've got so many needs of my own race. How do you expect me? How does God expect me to fulfil his purpose in places other than just right here, right now? I've just got a promotion.

I can't be expected to give that up. Does God really have me in mind when it comes to his kingdom work in other countries? But I was never good at languages.

She's better at communicating than me. What do I have to offer? What do I have to offer? Well, Jeremiah, whose gifts we don't know, finds himself, through this profound experience of God's call, caught up in a much bigger plan.

[17 : 24] God chose someone inexperienced, young perhaps, certainly untrained, to confront the world of his day.

And by so doing, shows our excuses as being fairly weak. Well, Jeremiah is the man to confront this national crisis.

But God gives him some confirmation, some encouragement, not only to get him going, but to keep him going. And in verses 11 to 13, we read of two visions which Jeremiah had to keep him rolling along.

The word of the Lord came to me, and we read in verse 11, saying, Jeremiah, what do you see? And I said, I see a branch of an almond tree.

The Lord said to me, you have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it. The word for almond and watch sound very similar. God's playing kind of cosmic scrabble.

[18 : 43] God's enjoying words and using a pun to make his point. God's giving this encouragement to Jeremiah, saying, look, I will watch over and accomplish what I intend to do.

Be reassured, Jeremiah, I will do what I've said. And what is it that God has said? Well, that's the content of the next vision.

From verse 13, the word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, what do you see? And I said, I see a boiling pot tilted away from the north. The Lord said to me, out of the north, disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of this land.

For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the Lord. They shall come, and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah.

And I will utter my judgments against them for all their wickedness in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshipped the works of their own hands. But you, Jeremiah, gird up your loins, stand up and tell them everything that I command you.

[19 : 56] Don't break down before them, or I will break you before them. And I, for my part, have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, the people of the land.

They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you. For I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you. What is the word of the Lord that will surely happen?

Well, the boiling pot is tilted away from the north. The land of Israel will be invaded from the north. These northerners will come in and scold the people, overrun the people, capture Jerusalem and take people into captivity.

And why? Why will this kingdom do this? Well, it's because the kingdom of Israel has sinned irredeemably.

They've forsaken God and worshipped other gods, worshipped idols which are no gods. And it shouldn't be any surprise that this is exactly what would be the result, because God had said as the people entered the land at the end of Deuteronomy that if they ignored him, they would be spat out of the land.

[21 : 19] They would be vomited out. They would be sent into exile. This is exactly what God has said he would do. God is honouring his word. God is honouring his word.

God is honouring his word. As this boiling pot, tilted away from the north, spills over into the land and takes the people into exile. They have followed other gods.

Now, I'd love to be in Jeremiah's shoes at one level, because I find it really difficult when I talk to people who are middle class in Australia, to describe to them what their idols, what their other gods are.

For in Jeremiah's time, it was quite clear that the people went up onto a certain hillside and worshipped in ways which God hadn't prescribed. But the ways in which we make idols, the ways in which we commit the sins of idolatry, aren't quite as clear cut.

When does my new car become an idol? When is shopping in Chadston a religious experience? When does my support of the Essendon football team become an offering to other gods?

[22 : 48] How much do I live for my work or for my family in opposition to God? How will I know when something in my life has become an idol that God wants to rebuke me for?

I wish I were in Jeremiah's shoes, because it was really easy at one level to point out to the people in this day, that is wrong, you can't go there, you can't do that. Our idolatry is so much more subtle.

It's so much more pernicious. Our idolatry is so much harder to isolate, to identify, to turn from. For me personally, I know when something's become an idol.

For when people speak against it, even if it's not deliberately aimed at me, I become defensive and embarrassed. And I realise at that point, though it might be okay to have that or do that at one level, if my reaction inside that others don't see as one of defensiveness or embarrassment, perhaps that very thing for me has become an idol.

Perhaps that very thing has caused me to leave my first love. And certainly in Jeremiah's day, as he goes about preaching, God was fully expecting that there would be a great reaction on part of the people, for he has to give Jeremiah these visions of confirmation, these visions to encourage him to keep going.

- [24 : 22] And he has to warn him that he would provide him with the armour he needs to keep on speaking, even when it gets tough. Even when the leaders of the people refuse to hear his words. God expects Jeremiah so to preach that others just don't like it.

They oppose. Their hearts grow harder. They refuse to turn around and turn back.

Jeremiah is God's mouthpiece. And we will go on to see how much it costs, how difficult it is, how painful it is, how torn up Jeremiah is inside at the very task he has to deliver on God's behalf.

Next week from Jeremiah chapter 20, we'll be learning of this internal turmoil which the call that God has placed on Jeremiah's life causes to him.

Well, God used Jeremiah to deal with a moment of crisis in the life of the nation.

- [25 : 38] And Jeremiah preached judgment and wanted the people to prepare for imminent invasion. Not only were these northerners, these Babylonians, actually God's doing, he was the one bringing them to punish the people.

But though at one level this is the end of a phase in Israel's life, it is as well the beginning of a new phase for God's people.

For from now on in the life of Israel, the nations around become more and more sharply focused. Though God was ending something he was actually beginning something afresh and anew as well.

This crisis would result in a whole new phase of God's work in the world in which being part of God's people wasn't equivalent to living in Palestine.

Being part of God's people would be believing in his promises wherever you or I might find ourselves. in the Holy Land or dispersed through the nations of the world.

- [26 : 58] Indeed, when the Apostle Paul comes to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, he uses these same words of Jeremiah's commission to describe what he himself has been given to do.

For we read in Galatians 1.15, God who set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace was pleased to reveal his son to me so that I might proclaim him amongst the nations.

God who set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace was pleased to reveal his son to me so that I might proclaim him amongst all the nations.

The book of Jeremiah, at first reading it might be a council of despair. But as we read on this month, we will discover that much beyond a council of despair, it's actually a positive encouragement for us to be bold and to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ, God's rescue operation to all the nations of the world.

God's grace gives to us encouragement to preach not only judgment to come, but the possibility of a new beginning. Let me pray.

- [28 : 28] Our Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the work you achieved in the life and ministry of Jeremiah, that he is for me, that he is for us such a great hero in the faith, that though we don't learn particularly about his gifts, we do learn about his perseverance, though we don't learn much about his family background, we do learn enormous amounts about the cost it was for him to honour you and your word.

Please make us like Jeremiah, bearing up under difficulty and bearing forth your word into all the world.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Congratulations. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank
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Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.