

Followers of the Way

What does it mean, to live in obedience?

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Jeremiah 7:1-20

Time and again in the Old Testament, once they are settled in the Promised Land, we see Israel and Judah coming under judgment for their apostasy and sin. Time and again, the Lord calls out to them to repent, as in our reading from Jeremiah this morning, and time and again the people refuse to listen, so that judgment becomes inevitable. As a prophet and priest in Judah, Jeremiah was living in turbulent times. His ministry, warning the people of judgment if they failed to repent, ran from 626 to 586 BC, so he witnessed the fall of Israel, and saw first-hand Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem in 605, and then the city's complete collapse in 586. Needless to say, his prophecies of impending doom did not make him popular, but to give warning was from the start his direct commission from the Lord. Chapter 1, v.7-8 "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you..."

And we know that both Israel and Judah, which had prospered down the years, had become reliant on their own resources, entering into political alliances with neighbouring powers in an effort to preserve their autonomy, while rejecting God and joining in the cultic, blasphemous worship of the peoples round about. And, because of their intransigent failure to listen – what is branded prostitution and adultery – God announced, through Jeremiah, that He was calling a savage people from out of the north, who would bring disaster and ravage the land.

In many ways, I think we can see a lot of parallels to today.

We too live in a Godless society, that not just rejects God, but says we can do whatever we want, because we're in control. We boast that we can re-create and improve creation, and our gods now are science and sexual libertarianism, fed by the blood sacrifice of the unborn. Even worse perhaps, we welcome all religions into our society, proudly saying we're multi-faith and multi-cultural, and that all gods are the same. And to maintain peace in our increasingly unstable world, we enter into alliances and pacts with foreign powers – but the governing factor for many - perhaps all - of these nations isn't to uphold justice and stand against wrong, but is rather to ensure that our lives and financial prosperity can continue with as little disruption as possible.

Just as with Judah, God has seen from heaven. Over the years, He has called us endlessly to repent and turn back to Him for help – and we've refused to listen. We don't really need a prophet, because it seems all too clear now that disaster lies ahead. Financial collapse, disease, famine, demographic crisis ... war ... one-world government ... It's all looming on the horizon. This is where our supposed 'control' has brought us, teetering on the edge of extinction, and, from what we are seeing now, we know that God has withdrawn His protection. We, not He, are the architects of our judgment.

So just how, in these troubled times, do we live in obedience? And is there hope?

In 2 Chronicles 7:14, God promises, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will heal their land." The problem, on current form, is that there is no indication of people turning back to God, and even the Church, which should be giving a moral and spiritual lead, is becoming increasingly apostate. Again, this was the situation faced by Jeremiah in Judah – and let's be clear, Jeremiah, though known as the archetypal prophet of doom, never stopped loving his people and crying out for them to God. But God said to him, v.16 'As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you.'

Looked at objectively, that's pretty scary, because it suggests, from the parallels, that we're now in a situation where judgment is inevitable. But though he was forbidden to pray for judgment to be averted, Jeremiah's call, throughout his long ministry, remained to sound a warning. Why? The answer is simple. Because there was always a chance that men and women – some men and women – would pay heed and repent ... and be saved. And Jeremiah's work, which came at huge personal cost, was vital, because it gave insight and understanding into what was going on, and laid the roots for the remnant who would, after a period of purification in Babylon, return and once again take possession of the Promised Land. **It was Jeremiah's warnings of doom that carried the seeds of revival, and in that there was hope.**

Our call today is similarly to bear witness, faithfully and without compromise, to the Lord's truth. To carry His light into the darkness. The times we face are perhaps even more dire than those confronting Jeremiah – though none of us can claim to know the mind of God, it feels as if the Lord's return might well be near. But, whether near or far, God's will remains to snatch those from the flames who might yet be saved.

So obedience requires that we stand on and in faith and look outwards – not in judgment, but in uncompromising love, calling people to repent, and looking after the wounded, damaged, and hurt. No matter what is said by some Church leaders – of all denominations – the Bible cannot be updated or rewritten to conform with mankind's supposed evolution. The Bible is our instruction manual for life; and God, who is the author of life and our ultimate judge, requires that we are obedient to His word. No matter what condemnation, insult, or even persecution, we may find we face, our call is to trust and keep faith.

This doesn't mean, of course, that we won't face difficulty or challenge ... or even persecution. But the battle belongs to the Lord and, while we live in obedience, He will keep faith and will be with us.

One of my heroes in the Bible is the apostle Peter, because he so clearly loved the Lord, but, equally clearly, he often got things wrong, sometimes quite spectacularly. There's a beautiful legend told of the apostle at the end of his life, when he was fleeing Nero's persecution of the Christians in Rome. Legend has it that as he was scuttling as fast as he could along the Appian Way, he met Jesus headed in the opposite direction, back into Rome. 'Where are you going, Lord?' asked Peter. Jesus replied, 'I'm going to Rome to be crucified again'. And it was then that Peter realised his priority wasn't to get to safety,

but was to shepherd and look after the people of God. This was the Lord's command to him, given at the resurrection, and that's our command today.

Tradition tells us that Peter did indeed return to Rome, where, perhaps predictably, he was crucified at the foot of Vatican Hill. Obedience means that, whatever danger or trouble may lie ahead, we carry the light into the darkness, in absolute trust that whatever may lie ahead, the Lord is with us and will provide. And, at the last, will bring us safely home.