Faithfulness in an Unravelling World
Jeremiah 1:1-19

We're starting a new series in the book of Jeremiah, one of the major Old Testament prophets. And when I told my girls that's what we're doing, their response was, 'Dad, why would you do that?' Because it's not exactly a barrel load of laughs. And yet, it's an extraordinary book. For a start, it was written some 2600 years ago. And when the first draft was read to the king of Judah, he took out a knife sliced it up line by line and threw it in the fire. So the political elite of Jeremiah's day thought it was trash, to be burned. Yet two and half millennia later, here we are reading it.

Secondly, it's remarkable because of what it claims to be. It was written at a time of huge upheaval in the life of God's people. And through out all that time, God was speaking - and Jeremiah wrote it down. And if you read it, like Jeremiah, you'll hear God speak to you.

But thirdly, Jeremiah served as a prophet for over 40 years. That's 40 of the most traumatic years of Israel's history, and he faced huge opposition, and yet, he kept going and stayed faithful. And as a result, I can almost guarantee that you will find his life and his words, hugely relevant for your own life.

Reading: Jeremiah 1:1-19

An Unravelling World
Look at v1-2: 'The words of Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the Lord came…' So Jeremiah is from a family of priests, in a small village, and a small tribe, a few miles from Jerusalem. And he's probably descended from the line of Abiathar, who was deposed as high priest by King Solomon after David's death; whereas the priests currently holding power in Jerusalem were from the line of Zadok who Solomon installed in Abiathar's place. So Jeremiah's an outsider, from the backwoods. And yet, God's word came to him.

In fact, it came, he tells us, v2-3: 'in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem.'

Now, that might mean nothing to you. But imagine a journalist telling you they had worked as a across Europe from the first world war through to the end of the second. You'd immediately understand what they'd witnessed. Trench warfare; the rise of communism and fascism, destruction on a terrible scale. And the same is true for Jeremiah.

He begins his ministry in the 13th year of King Josiah he tells us, that's 627BC. And Josiah was Judah's last good king; through the reign of Jehoiakim - who was a tyrant; through the reign of Zedekiah, who was a weak king and didn't know which way to turn politically. And Jeremiah preached and prophesied through it all.

And as he did so, the outside world was changing rapidly. The old super-power Assyria was weakening and Babylon and Egypt were battling for domination, a battle Babylon eventually won - but Judah was caught in the crossfire.

And when Babylon triumphed she turned on Judah. And when she did Jeremiah was there - v3 ‘until the captivity of Jerusalem’. As Jerusalem was besieged, destroyed and her people taken into exile.

And for the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem that event would have been the end of the world as they knew it. God’s city handed over to pagans and destroyed; God’s people thrown out of the land God had given them and led away in chains. And Jeremiah saw it all and through it all he kept saying, this is God’s doing.

So this was a tumultuous time. Nationalism on the rise in Judah. Turmoil on the international scene. Old superpowers falling, new ones rising. As the old order of things was crumbling, and this storm was gathering on Judah’s borders.

So this book is incredibly relevant for our own day isn’t? As the old politics and alliances are shaken and the world is changing. What does God have to say at times like this? And not just ‘out there’ - maybe in your own life things feel unsettled, and you’re not sure how things are going to turn out. Or maybe like Jeremiah you feel embattled. And yet Jeremiah managed to navigate this period with faithfulness and integrity, with as one writer puts it ‘a long obedience in the same direction’ and he does it without becoming calloused or hard of heart. So how did he do it? Or rather, what did God do in his life to enable him to keep going through it all?

The Call of God

Look at v4-5: ‘Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” So how does God launch this young man out into the role he has for him? By telling him, Jeremiah, I made you. And before I made you, I knew you. Jeremiah, I knew you before you knew anything. I saw you and loved you before you even had eyes to see anything.

And 40 years later, Jeremiah still remembers those words. Because you would, wouldn’t you? I mean, when those words sink in they have power to give a man like Jeremiah courage and hope in the face of years of tears and trauma, because they told him that in all his weakness, in all his frailty, in all the times he felt like quitting, God knew him, and had made him, and had wired him the way he was, and loved him.

But listen, what was true for Jeremiah is true for you. You see, maybe in the past someone has told you you’re good for nothing, and that has scarred you. Or maybe someone has told you you were, or are, unwanted. But God, your heavenly Father speaks a much better word over you. That before you were conceived - he knew you. He imagined you. So it doesn’t matter whether your mother and father wanted you - God did. And he never makes a mistake. Instead he says, you’re my workmanship. My fingerprints are all over you, I love you.

But look what else he says to Jeremiah: “And before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Now, when you were at school, did you ever have that experience of standing in a line in sports class, and two of you were picked to be captains and then they had to pick their teams from the rest of you. And you’re standing there, desperately hoping you won’t be the last to be chosen!

Well, here, God says to Jeremiah, I've chosen you. He has been handmade and handpicked by God for a purpose. We all are.

You see, atheism and scientific materialism can never tell you that you matter. All they can tell you is that you *are* matter, an ultimately meaningless chance event. But God says something very different to Jeremiah and to you. Listen to what Paul says: '*For those whom he [God] foreknew he also predestined* to be conformed to the image of his Son… *And those whom he predestined he also called*, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?*' (Romans 8:29-31).

And Jeremiah could keep going through all the turmoil because he knew that God had chosen him and called him and set him apart to speak God's word to the nation, and ultimately, whatever anyone else said about him, that was what mattered. And Paul is saying that you can know the same thing: that God has chosen you for a purpose - to be conformed to the image of his son - to daily become more like Christ, and shine his light in a dark world. That as Paul says elsewhere, we're 'called to be saints' (Romans 1:7) - set apart for God's glory and to do those works he's already prepared for us to do - Eph 2:10 - wherever he places us.

You see, Jeremiah could have looked in a load of other places for the security and confidence he needed to get him through these years of trouble, couldn't he? He could have looked for it in the affirmation of others, people telling him he's a great guy or a great preacher; or in the love of his friends and family; or in the physical security of Jerusalem. Except everyone of those was stripped away from him. If he was to last the course, he needed something that could never be taken from him. And this was it - that God loved him, and had made him, and had called him. And in Christ, you can know the same for those times when the storm hits you.

But did you notice Jeremiah's response? Verse 6, 'Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." In *The Lord of the Rings,* Frodo is tasked with carrying the ring to its destruction. But there comes that moment when the weight of that calling seems too much for him and he says, 'I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?' And that's Jeremiah's question isn't it? He feels the weight of what God is calling him to do and he knows he's not up to it.

'I don't know how to speak God' - God, you've picked the wrong person. 'I'm only a youth' - God, your timing is all wrong. Do you think he's making excuses? He's just speaking the truth as he sees it: he probably isn't that good at speaking. And he *is* young, probably just a teenager, in a culture that equated wisdom with age.

And there are going to be times when what you're facing, what God is asking of you, to walk in obedience to him, seems too big, or too costly, or too demanding of you. That might be to say 'no' rather than sleep with your boyfriend or girlfriend. It might be to stay single rather than marry a non-Christian. It might be, once you are married, to stay in a marriage that's hard, rather than quit. It might be to share your faith with a friend, when you fear what they might think of you, or take a stand and speak out over something at work. And like Jeremiah, you feel you don't have it in you to do it.

But just like Jeremiah, that's a great place to be for God to use you! Look how God responds: v7, "Do not say, 'I am only a youth.' So God doesn't deny Jeremiah's young, anymore than he denies

that you and I lack moral courage or ability. But what he does say is, that has got nothing to do with it! And he tells him he is to go wherever and say whatever God tells him.

You see, it's precisely because Jeremiah did not trust himself, that God could use him. Because it's only when we're brought to the end of ourselves that we begin to truly trust Him. And it's for that reason that God is always using the weak, and those who can't talk well, and those whose lives have been stained by sin, and those who feel they don't have the strength, to do his work. As God said to Paul, "my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). And the Lord Jesus came in weakness, and was crucified in weakness, and it's through the weakness and the foolishness of the cross that he shames the strong and breaks the power of sin and death. And so it's precisely as Jeremiah, and you and I, admit 'I can't do this', that God comes and says, 'But I can'.

And v9, 'Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth.' And if the call of God was the first thing that enabled Jeremiah to withstand the gathering storm this is the second.

The Word of God

Now, someone has said that God does not call the equipped, he equips the called. He gives you everything that you need to do the stuff he calls you to do. And Jeremiah knows he has neither the words nor the wisdom to speak, so God touches his mouth and gives him both: v9, "Behold, I have put *my words* in your mouth."

And Jeremiah experiences the life-transforming power of God's words. And if you're a Christian, so have you. As Peter says, you've been 'born again', you've been made new, God has begun his life-changing work in you, 'through the living and abiding word of God' (1 Peter 1:23). And that power doesn't stop at conversion, when God speaks to you, through his word, it has this ongoing power to upend you, to challenge you, to encourage you, to strengthen you. Because when God speaks it can't help but come with power.

And God says, v10, "See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." And, if you notice, there's twice as much pulling down and destroying there as building up and planting. And because of that there must have been times when Jeremiah was tempted to despair - 'all I'm doing is speaking words that pull down and destroy'. So right at the outset, God tells him, Jeremiah there is hope. Judgement is coming, on a terrible scale, but the time for building and planting will also come.

And when Christ was crucified it must have seemed the same, mustn't it? - that all hope was gone, that God's purposes were broken, as Jesus was plucked up and broken down, destroyed and overthrown. But that was just Friday. Everything changed as dawn broke on Sunday morning. And it's the power of Christ's resurrection from the dead, the power to build after everything has been destroyed, the power to plant after everything has been uprooted, that can give you and me hope when the storm hits, or the cost of obedience comes, because we know that whilst today may be the darkest of Fridays, Sunday's coming.

And God gives Jeremiah two visions to bring home to him the power of his word. He asks him, v11, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And [Jeremiah] said, "I see an almond branch." Then the Lord said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it." And the word for almond branch is *saqed*. And the word for watching is *soqed*. So Jeremiah says, *saqed* is what I see, and God says, *soqed* is what I'm doing. Jeremiah, whatever anyone else says to you, or about you, you

can have this unshakeable confidence that my words will come to pass. And history tells us, they did.

But then Jeremiah sees something else. Verse 13, "I see a boiling pot, facing away from the north." Facing towards Judah, about to spill its scalding contents over the land. And the Lord says, v14, "Out of the north disaster [literally, evil] shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land." In other words, God is going to raise up a pagan nation to conquer Judah and Jerusalem.

Why? Why is this tidal wave of evil and death going to break on the nation? Verse 16, "I will declare my judgments against them, for all *their evil* in forsaking me." They have sown evil in worshipping and sacrificing to other gods, and so they will reap evil.

You see, whether on a national or a personal level, there are always consequences when we worship and sacrifice to the wrong thing, aren't there? I meant, just look at our own societies. Worship the gods of money or power or sex or extreme personal freedom and there will always be an accounting.

But, if Jeremiah didn't know this vision of the tilting pot, he might have watched Babylon's invasion in the years to come and thought that evil was triumphing, that darkness was winning. But God tells him, 'no, even when things are at their darkest, I'm in control.' But it's only when you know God's word that you can look at the world, and your life, and know that even in the dark times, God is working everything for your good in Christ.

But there's one last thing that gives Jeremiah the courage he needs for the days ahead.

The Presence of God
Verse 8: "Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord." Verse 17, "Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you."

So God knows that, over the next 40 years, Jeremiah is going to have ample reason to be afraid. Stuff is going to happen to him, and people are going to treat him in ways that could seriously intimidate him. And those people will be people with power to hurt him. And yet, God doesn't promise him that he won't experience any of that trouble, in fact he tells him he will. But what he does promise him is that God will be there with him through it all. That all the time Jeremiah speaks God's word, and does his will, he will be invincible, like a man wearing missile-proof armour. Seek the comfortable life, try and wriggle out from what the word of God is saying, and that force shield around him will disappear. But stay in the fight, stay faithful to God's calling and God's word, and no one can touch him.

And listen, the same is true for us and our kids. We're never safer than when we're walking in God's ways. But that doesn't mean you won't face opposition. You will. And from exactly the same kinds of people as Jeremiah: from those with political power - kings, or the religious - priests, or from the culture - the people. And just like in Jeremiah's day, living by and speaking the truth of God's word will make you vulnerable. So just like him you'll face reasons to fear - reasons why it might be safer or less costly to go with the flow or do what deep down you know is wrong.

And that’s why the most frequently repeated command in the whole Bible is… Fear not!

Because even more than Jeremiah, you can know that God is with you. Because the Lord Jesus, the Word of God incarnate, Emmanuel - God with us, has come, and he says, Go into all the world and proclaim the good news - speak it, live it, *and I will be with you always*, to the end of the age.