The Power of Shame and the Power of God
Jeremiah 20:1-18

We're back in Jeremiah today. I know today is Pentecost, and the passage we're going to look at isn't about Pentecost, but what it is about has a whole lot to do with the Spirit's work in our lives. And that's because, through the life of Jeremiah, it shows us a way through the emotional fall out of sin and shame and suffering in our lives.

Reading: Jeremiah 20:1-18

We're going to look at 4 things: firstly, the reality of opposition and secondly, the power of shame; thirdly, the reality of the rollercoaster, and fourthly the power of God.

The Reality of Opposition
Look at v1, 'Now Pashhur the priest, the son of Immer, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things.' So Pashhur is a priest, he's a religious leader. But not any old priest. He is chief officer in the temple - he's the guy responsible for maintaining law and order in the city and the temple precincts. And he hears Jeremiah preaching and his response is violent. Verse 2, 'Then Pashhur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the Lord.' And the stocks were a kind of wooden apparatus that held him bound hand and feet. So Jeremiah's flogged and then put on public display in the stocks, in the temple.

But it wasn't just Pashhur who opposed Jeremiah, was it? Look at v10, '"Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" say all my close friends, watching for my fall.' Now, if you know anything about totalitarian regimes, like Mao's China or Stalin's Russia or Hitler's Germany, you know that one of the terrors of such regimes is public denouncement - when your neighbours, or someone who has a grudge against you, denounces you as an enemy of the revolution, or the state. And Jeremiah is living under that constant threat - except the people threatening to denounce him are his closest friends.

Ok, so why does Pashhur, a religious man, and others with him, behave the way he does? Why the violence? Well, Jeremiah tells us - and it's in response to Jeremiah's preaching. And Jeremiah has been saying that because of the nation's sins, God is going to judge and bring to an end the temple and the city of Jerusalem - the very things that Pashhur, who embodies religion and power, stands for and believes in.

And when Pashhur comes the next day to free Jeremiah, look what Jeremiah says to him, v4: 'Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will make you a terror *to yourself and all your friends.*' So what Pashhur thinks is so important, what he's willing to get angry and violent about it, is going to end up destroying him. He's going to become a victim of the very terror he has tried to inflict on Jeremiah. Because ultimately sin is self-destructive.

You see, look at v5, where the Lord says to Pashhur, "I will give all the wealth of the city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, and all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hands of their enemies." And v6, where he says of Pashhur, "You have prophesied falsely." And Pashhur, and others, have been telling the people that they have nothing to fear, that they can go on living the way they want, paying lip service to God, enjoying all the blessings of being God's people, while

what they really valued, what they really put their trust in, what they really thought mattered and made them who they were, was their wealth, their possessions, and the profit they were making. And Jeremiah is saying, no, there is an inevitable, destructive consequence to living like this. But Pashhur, doesn't want to hear that and he doesn't want others to hear it.

Now, today, at least in the West, we can see the same kinds of forces, of religion, or authority, trying to silence, or at least side-line, the word of God when it suggests that the way we live, and what we most value, is wrong. And you might experience that on campus, or in the work place, or at school, or in the media.

But the problem is, it's not just others who do that, is that? I mean, think how you might respond when the word of God challenges you in some area of your life. Maybe it's in some behaviour or some attitude or it reminds you of the fragility and shortness of your life. And for a moment you see it and the light shines in to the recesses of your heart. But it also makes you uncomfortable, because it implies you're wrong and that change is needed. So what do you do? Do you allow that light to shine and bring you to confession and repentance and change, or do you quickly shut the door and move on?

You see, its easy to think that our greatest enemies are Pashhur's modern-day equivalents. When in reality our greatest enemies aren't other people, they are, and always have been, sin and death. The very things that threaten Judah, and Pashhur. That try and persuade you, you can find life and joy and happiness apart from God. When in reality they are self-destructive, and they rob you of the very thing you're looking for.

But they don't just rob us. They shame us.

The Power of Shame

Now, why does Pashhur put Jeremiah in the stocks, in *the gateway, the way in* to the temple? Because he wants to shame him and humiliate him. He wants all the people of Jerusalem, as they walk through that gate, supposedly to come and worship God, to see Jeremiah hanging there, and say, 'look what happens when you believe and teach this stuff about God judging us.' Jeremiah's a loser - so don't listen to what he's saying. Listen to what we're saying, about a god who promises you you can live however you want, that you can have your best life now, he's the god you want. Not Jeremiah's talk about holiness and the judgment to come. That's for losers.

And Jeremiah feels that shame. Verse 7, 'I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me.' Verse 18, 'Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?'

And shame and the threat of shame is a powerful weapon. Especially to silence you and keep you quiet. And I suspect that one of the major reasons that we as Christians don't sometimes speak up for Christ when we should is because we don't want to be shamed, we don't want to be ridiculed or embarrassed. And if you have kids, this is what they experience in school or on campus. Because if you speak out of line with what the world thinks, you risk being seen as someone who is unacceptable. You risk shame.

But again, this isn't just a weapon used by those who oppose God's message. It's one of the most potent weapons of your real enemies, of sin and death. And you can feel shame because of stuff that

you have done, or do - those times when you have chosen other things over God. And sin offers you great rewards and then shames you when you reach out to take them. But you can also feel shame at the sin that others have done to you.

And shame tells you that you're dirty. That you're soiled. That you're a disgrace. That you're unacceptable. That no one wants you. Shame sends you away. And whenever we think that God could not love us, shame is lurking near by. And it tells you God doesn't love you, how could he?, and neither does anyone else. And like Adam and Eve in the garden, shame makes you hide, from God and from others. And as Ed Welch the writer and Christian counsellor says, when shame has got you, 'life can feel more like death.' And Jeremiah knows that.

And just as the shame of society has this power to silence the word of God, so the shame of sin tries to silence it in your life. And it's because of shame that Jeremiah rides a rollercoaster of emotions.

The Reality of the Rollercoaster

Now, I hate rollercoasters. I think I must be one of the few grown men who gets on a ride designed for 5 year olds at Legoland, and thinks he's going to die. It's those climbs followed by that plunging down that leaves your stomach in your mouth.

But that's what Jeremiah's experiencing in his emotions. He is shamed and humiliated because he has been faithful to God and he plunges into despair, and then his hope climbs again, before plummeting again. And maybe for you it's not as dramatic as here, but I suspect you know something of what that emotional rollercoaster feels like. You start the day feeling down, but as the day goes on you feel better and your joy rises as you trust God's promises that he does love you, and you begin to win the battle of faith, but by the evening, you're down again.

So look at the form it takes with Jeremiah. In v7 he tells God, 'O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived.You are stronger than I, and you have prevailed.' In other words, God you've tricked me, you've duped me, you've conned me. But God hasn't tricked him, has he? God never promised Jeremiah that he would be popular or successful or wealthy. In fact, God has always been very straight with Jeremiah about the cost of being his servant. But even if God hasn't deceived him, that is how Jeremiah feels - because shame has this way of silencing the truth of God in your heart.

But Jeremiah doesn't just feel cheated he feels overpowered. He feels like he has been outplayed by God. Because it's as if he can't win. If he speaks of God he just gets ridiculed and beaten up: v8, 'For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long.' But if he doesn't, if he decides, v9, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," he just can't hold God's word in: v9, 'There is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.'

And Jeremiah feels trapped. He doesn't want to speak of God but he can't not speak of God. Do you know what that feels like? Maybe you feel the pull of the world, or of your doubts, or the shame of your sin, or the unpopularity of the Christian faith, and you feel this pull away from God. You don't want to speak of him. But you can't not speak of him, you can't turn away, because deep down you know the truth, and you know the pull of God's Spirit. And like Jeremiah, you feel trapped.

But listen, Jeremiah doesn't stay trapped. In v11-13, he swings back to hope. And he knows that, whatever shame he's experienced at the hands of his enemies, ultimately it's his enemies who will

be brought down: v11, ‘My persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me. They will be greatly shamed… their eternal dishonour will never be forgotten.’ You see, ultimately Jeremiah knows how the story is going to end - he simply needed to extend his horizon. And as he puts his hope in God his mood, his emotions, his heart lifts. Verse 13, ‘Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.’

And yet, no sooner is he up than what happens? He crashes again, and in v14-18 he curses the day he was born and the man who told his dad he’d had a son, and he wishes he’d been murdered in his mother’s womb. Why? Why, when your birthday should be a time of rejoicing, does it become for Jeremiah a reason for cursing? Because, to quote Ed Welch again, when you are engulfed with shame, ‘life can feel more like death’ and Jeremiah wishes he was dead.

And his complaint against God ends with that question in v18, ‘Why did I come out from the womb to… spend my days in shame?’ And Jeremiah’s not given an answer. The question is left hanging there. And yet, this is the last of Jeremiah’s complaints. The heart felt complaints against God that are so raw and so real and that mark this book end here. And yet, in the years to come, Jeremiah is going to face many more, and worse, threats against him than here, but somehow he finds stability, somehow he endures. Somehow he keeps walking through a life that, at times, seemed like a living death. And it’s not that God answers him and promises him his best life now. It’s not that God promises him he’s going to make him the head and not the tail. It’s because Jeremiah hits the bottom and he finds God there. The God who knows all about shame.

The Power of God
Look at v11, look at what it is that brings him up from his tail spin: ‘But the Lord is with me *as a dread warrior*; *therefore* my persecutors will stumble; they will not overcome me.’

You know, the world tells you that if you want to defeat your enemies, if you want to succeed, if you want to be popular, you’ve got to become a fighter, you’ve got to become stronger than them, you’ve got to become a better you. And religion tells you, if want to wash away your shame, you’ve got to cleanse yourself, you’ve got to do better, and work harder at being better, and fight smarter to beat your sin. In other words, you’ve got to become your own dread warrior.

But when Jeremiah hit the bottom he discovered that when others shamed him and disowned him, God was with him in that pit. And not just with him, but with him as his dread warrior. The One who fights and vanquishes his enemies who shame him.

And if Jeremiah needed to know that, what about you? Because you know you can’t defeat your enemies of sin and death on your own. And you’re powerless against shame. You can’t be your own dread warrior. But Christ can. And he knows all about shame.

And at the beginning of his ministry Jesus is lead by the Spirit into the wilderness. And the enemy comes for him, trying to get him to doubt, to question who he is, trying to pull him away, and Jesus defeats him, and defeats him with the word of God. And for the next three years Jesus goes about overturning sin and death. And sinners are forgiven and the dead are raised and men and women who lived lives smeared with shame - because of stuff they’d done, because of stuff others had done to them, because of the way culture treated them, were cleansed and forgiven and welcomed back in - tax-collectors, and prostitutes, and lepers, and a woman bleeding for years. And they’re all made

whole because Jesus drew near them in their pit. And when Jesus comes near you and cleanses you and accepts you and speaks words of love over you - shame flees.

But then, if Jeremiah's friends threaten to denounce him, Jesus was denounced, by Judas his friend. And his last hours were hours of unremitting shame, as he was beaten and humiliated in public, by the same powers or religion and law and order who beat Jeremiah. And if Jeremiah was bound hand and foot to the wooden stocks, Christ was nailed hand and foot to the cross.

But it's there, at the cross, in all his seeming weakness, that he is your dread warrior. As he does what you can never do - and through his death and resurrection he defeats your enemies of sin and death, and he breaks their power, and strips the enemy bare. In the words of Paul in Col 2:15, 'He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them.' And he does it all to secure your forgiveness, to set you free from sin and death, to remove your shame, and to bring you to God.

And here, Jeremiah wishes he could die to avoid his mission; but Jesus didn't die to avoid his mission, he died to achieve his mission. Listen to what the writer to the Hebrews says, 'for the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, *despising the shame*, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.' (Heb 12:2). Now what does it mean to despise something? It means to treat it with contempt, to count it as nothing, as less than nothing. And he does that with the shame of the cross. And think about that shame - the shame of abandonment, as his friends desert him; the shame of mocking, as the rulers humiliate him; the shame of nakedness as he hangs there on public display; the shame of powerlessness, as the one who threw stars into space is reduced to a bleeding, gasping, dying corpse.

But whose shame is he carrying? It's yours. And he despised it, he flung it aside, so you never have to carry it again. And he does it, the writer tells us, for the joy that was set before him. The joy of resurrection, the joy of his ascension, the joy of him sitting down at the right hand of God the Father, the joy of pouring out his Spirit, so that in the words of Psalm 16:11, he might become our source of never-ending, fullness of joy. Not joy in you being popular; not joy in your life being trouble free; but joy in Christ even as you face opposition for him and take up your cross and follow him.

Because it's knowing that Christ is your warrior that gives you the strength to endure. Listen to Hebrews 12 again, 'Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame' (Heb 12:1-2). You feel like quitting, you feel trapped, you feel pulled by the world, you know the shame of sin. Look to Christ the writer says, it's him who gives you the strength to keep running.

And in 2 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul lists all the suffering and difficulties, and beatings and imprisonments and riots and slander and mocking he has endured for the sake of Christ, all the shame, and then he says he is, 2 Cor 7:9, 'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.' Now, how can you explain that paradox? How can you explain an unspeakable joy, not in the absence of sorrow and suffering and shame, but in the midst of it? What did Paul know that meant he could say in 2 Cor 4:8-9, 'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed'? What gave him the strength and the joy, to keep going in the face of all the opposition and shame that came his way? Well, look at v7,

‘We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power *belongs to God*, and not to us.’

Paul knew that it wasn't because he, Paul, was some great fighter, but because Jesus was. It’s why he says in Romans 8:37 that ‘we are more than conquerors though him who loves us.’ Now, how can you be more than a conqueror? I mean, either you’re a conqueror or you’re not. Either you’re a winner or you’re a loser. But not if you’re a Christian. You’re more that a conquerer against your enemies of sin and death and shame, because Christ gets into the ring and fights them and defeats them and conquers them for you, and then he gives you the prize. A prize you could never win, or deserve, on your own.

And in this life, if you want to stay faithful to him, you are going to face opposition and shame from others; but you’re also going to know the shame of your own sin. And some of us will know the shame of what others have done against us. And if you think you’ve got to be your own fighter, you won’t stay in the race, and you won’t stay sensitive to the word of God, you’ll end up in despair, never sure, you’ve done enough to cleanse yourself or fought hard enough to win God’s approval; or you’ll become proud, thinking you have.

But the good news of the gospel, in the words of the old hymn, is that Jesus ‘to the fight and to the rescue came.’ And at the cross he cries out, ‘it is finished, I’ve done it.’ So let us run, with our eyes fixed on him.