Christ the Righteous King
Jeremiah 21-23:6

The book of Jeremiah is not written in chronological order. It's a collection of his writings over decades of Judah's history. And today we're going to look at chapters 21-23, where Jeremiah brings together some of his writings and preaching against Judah's kings. And it begins at the end, with Judah's last king, Zedekiah, just before the fall and destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylon.

Now, at the start of the Second World War, things were going badly wrong for the allied powers and Britain. And finally, they turned to the man who all along had been warning of Hitler's true intentions, and the King asked Winston Churchill to become Prime Minister. And something like that happens here. After years of Jeremiah's warnings, Babylon has finally invaded, and Jerusalem is under seige. And the nation and city are in desperate straights. And the king sends for Jeremiah. But his response is very different to Churchill's.

Reading 21:1-5

Today, when life is going bad, or death is approaching, someone who has previously been more or less totally disinterested in God, can turn to him and start praying, or at least ask others to pray for them, can't they. And here, Zedekiah the king, does exactly that. He's spent years ignoring Jeremiah but now he's in trouble he asks him to pray to God for him. You see, he knows that centuries earlier King Hezekiah had been in a similar situation, only then it was the Assyrians surrounding Jerusalem, and God had brought about an amazing deliverence. And Zedekiah wants that to happen in his day. He wants a miracle. But that's the problem isn't it? And maybe you recognise this in your own life. He wants what God can give him, not God himself. He hopes that like a genie in a bottle, he can rub the bottle and God will pop up and do for him what he wants.

But did you see how God responds? Through Jeremiah, God tells Zedekiah, listen, it's not the king of Babylon, you need to worry about, he's the least of your problems, it's God. Verse 5, "I myself will fight against you."

Now, last week we saw how Christ is our dread warrior, the one who fights for us. So what's happened that God would say to Zedekiah, 'far from fighting for you, I will fight against you.'?

Well, the rest of chapters 21 and 22 tell us. Except, he doesn't just tell us what was wrong with Zedekiah and the kings who preceded him, he tells us something that's fundamentally wrong with the human heart. So, let's look at some excerpts and then at what God says he's going to do about it.

Reading: 21:11-12; 22:1-5; 8-9; 13-19; 23:1-6

We're going to look at 3 things: knowing God, being King, and having Christ as your king.

Knowing God
Now, if I were to ask you, 'what does it mean to know God?'; what does that look like in a person's life? maybe you'd home in on how you get to know God, or grow in your knowledge of God, or the inner-wellbeing or joy that comes from knowing God. I suspect that few of us would give the answer God gives.

Look at 22:16. God is describing King Josiah, the last good king of Judah, and he says: "He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? declares the Lord." So, faced with a king and a city that wants what God can give, like his protection, or his deliverance, rather than him, he says, 'Do you want to know what it really looks like to know me? It means to care for the poor and the needy.

And if you've been paying attention as we've been going through Jeremiah, that shouldn't surprise you, should it? Remember in Jeremiah 9 where the Lord says, "Let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord." In other words, God delights in, he loves, faithful, sacrificial love, justice and righteousness. So, it's no wonder that God says here in Jeremiah 22: Do you want to know what marks someone's life who truly knows me? He or she is going to love what I love: to defend the poor and the needy.

And in v3 God sets out what that should look like in the heart attitudes and policy priorities of a king: 'Thus says the Lord: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.' In other words, those with power are supposed to use their power for those who have no power - because that's what God does.

And it's what good King Josiah did. Verse 15, 'Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness?'

Now, whether you lean to the left or the right politically, all of us could agree with that, couldn't we? In any civil society, that the poor and orphans and widows and refugees should be cared for is common ground. Whether you think that is best achieved through state intervention or the power of the market and creation of wealth, is another matter, but that justice should be done and poverty and oppression are wrong is ground we can all stand on. And when you do, Jeremiah is saying that in some small way you are reflecting God's own heart.

And yet, despite the fact that we would all agree on that in theory, it seems incredibly hard to achieve, doesn't it. And state intervention, and socialism, seems to inevitably slide into oppression or an economic malaise that hinders the very thing it seeks to achieve; whilst capitalism seems to slide into greed and consumption.

So why, when caring for the poor and needy seems such the right thing to do, does it seem so hard to do? Well, Jeremiah tells us.

Being King

Now, if chapter 21 begins with King Zedekiah, the central part of chapter 22 is addressed to King Jehoiakim, the 3rd from last King of Judah. And he was a despot - a man who used power, not for those without power, but for himself, for his own self-advancement, to line his own pockets.

Listen to what God says to him, v13-14: "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbour serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages, who says, 'I will build myself a great house… paneling it with cedar and painting it with vermillion.'"

So, the very man, the king, who above all was supposed to act for justice and righteousness was building himself a great palace through injustice and unrighteousness. And God says to him in v17, 'You have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.'

In the British national anthem there are the words, referring to the Queen, 'Send her victorious, happy and glorious, long to reign over us.' But Jeremiah says that because of the way Jehoiakim has behaved the end of his reign is going to be anything but happy and glorious: v19, 'With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried, dragged and dumped beyond the gates of Jerusalem.' So, just like Zedekiah, Jehoiakim experienced what it is to have God fight against you.

But Jeremiah doesn't just tell us *how* Jehoiakim behaved, he tells us *why* he behaved this way. Look at v15: 'Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar?' In other words, Jehoiakim, do you really think that to be a king is to have a palace that's bigger and better than every other king?

And the answer, of course is, no. What makes a king is that he exercises power on behalf of those who have no power. But Jehoiakim would have said 'yes!'Being king means having more glory, living in more splendour, than everyone else.

But here's the thing, even though you *know* the answer is 'no', do you tend to think and live and as if the answer is 'yes' - like Jehoiakim? Think about it: deep down, do you think, or instinctively feel, it makes you more impressive, or of more value, or just feel more important, if your salary goes up, or if you're able to rent or buy a bigger, nicer apartment, or if you're given a bigger office, and get a better car? You see, Jehoiakim thinks that he is a greater, more glorious king, a king more to be feared, more to be honoured, because his palace is bigger and better. And the allure of power and possessions hasn't changed has it? Because they promise to make us *feel* like royalty - to compete with, to be better than those around us.

And in v8 Jeremiah gives us a summary of why destruction is coming: "Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord their God and worshipped other gods and served them." And the covenant was that God would be their God and they would be his people; he would be their king and they would be his subjects. But instead, they've made other things their god. Things like power and wealth and image.

And that's why justice and care for the poor has so much trouble gaining traction, because it has trouble gaining traction in our hearts. You see, Jehoiakim oppresses the poor and doesn't pay his workers, because he thinks a great palace and wealth makes him a great king. But, likewise, if we find more security in money, or a greater sense of wellbeing in possessions, than in God, or if we think our self-worth depends on being better than others, we're also going to find it difficult to use our power - our time and talents and finances - for justice and righteousness, because we'll think 'I can't afford to, I've got to hold on, I've got to stay ahead.'

Now, of course, that doesn't mean that no one works for justice or cares for the poor. But it does mean it's hard to do it for right motives. You see, you can work for social justice and your underlying motivation really be no different than Jehoiakim's, because you do it so that others will think of you as a kind and compassionate person. So just like Jehoiakim it's all about you and how others see you. And religion doesn't help. Because now, you're not engaged with social issues to

impress others, but to try and impress God. To try and put yourself in his favour, so that he'll bless you in some way. But that's really no different from Zedekiah, who also wants something from God but not God himself.

You see, remember how back in chapter 5 God gave Jeremiah a challenge, v1, "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem… search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth." But he couldn't. Because it's not just kings who struggle with idols, we all do. It's why in Romans 3:10, Paul writes, 'None is righteous, no not one.'

And that would be a truly bleak diagnosis if it wasn't for the hope of Jeremiah 23.

Having Christ

And in chapter 23, God promises that after Jerusalem has been destroyed and the people sent into exile, v3, 'I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them.' And in place of leaders using power for their own gain, v4, 'I will set shepherds over them who will care for them.' And after the return from exile, men like Nehemiah and Ezra did exactly that.

And yet, even having come back from exile, it wasn't long before the people found themselves under the oppressive power of the Greek and then the Roman Empire with all their rulers.

And so God promises something even more. Verse 5, "Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch." So a king, in the line of David, is going to sprout up, and he's not going to be like unrighteous Zedekiah or unjust Jehoiakim. Verse 5-6 again, 'He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved.' So what the kings in Jeremiah's day failed to do, and what we seem incapable of doing, this king will do.

And his name, Jeremiah says, will be, v6, "The Lord is our righteousness." And Jeremiah's saying all this during the reign of Zedekiah, whose name just happens to mean, 'The Lord is my righteousness'. But God is saying there's going to be a king who truly deserves that name. A king who will give you my righteousness.

And then, in the reign of another despot, Herod the great, Christ came. And an angel appeared to a young girl and told her she would give birth to a son. Luke 1:32, 'He will be great… and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David'. And when Jesus was born Magi come from the east, probably from Babylon of all places, asking, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?' (Matt 2:2). And during his ministry it was some of the poorest and most needy who recognised who Jesus was, as blind, begging Bartimeus calls out, 'Have mercy on me, Son of David.' And as he rode on a donkey into Jerusalem the crowds called out, 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!'

But unlike the kings of Jeremiah's day, Jesus didn't use power for himself. Jehoiakim wanted a palace greater than anyone else's, but Jesus had nowhere to lay his head. As Paul writes in Philippians 2, 'Though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped [it wasn't something he used for his own advantage] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant… he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.'

And Jesus' trial and crucifixion were all about him being king. His accusers brought him to Pilate, and what was their charge? 'We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king.' (Luke 23:2) And what does Pilate ask him? "Are you the king of the Jews?" And Herod mocks him, dressing him in splendid clothes, the clothes of a king. And the soldiers stripped him and flogged him and put a purple robe on him, the colour of kings, and they twisted a crown of thorns and crowned him with it; and they put a reed in his hand, a limp piece of grass, as a sceptre and knelt before him, mocking him saying, "Hail king of the Jews." And then they crucified him, and the charge above his head read, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

And this is not some self-obsessed, despotic monarch getting his just desserts, is it? This is not a man who has systematically oppressed the poor and murdered the innocent finally facing justice. This is the Son of God. This is the King of Heaven and Earth. This is the One on whom angels cannot look, before whom they fall down in worship. And he's beaten and broken and powerless. And no one ever looked less like a king than Christ crucified. As the soldiers mocked him, 'If you are the King the Jews, save yourself.'

But it was precisely there that the king was saving us. It was there that the king was giving his life for ours, rescuing the poor and the needy. People like us, people under the oppression of sin and the wreckage of idols. It was there that he who knew no sin was made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him. The Lord our Righteousness. It was there that he took upon himself all God's righteous justice against those times when we've failed to act justly and righteously.

And the dying thief, crucified beside him, saw it, he saw with the eyes of faith what all those standing around failed to see, as he called out to him, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' You're the king, Jesus, you're the branch of David, and I trust you.

Let me ask you, do you see what he saw? Do you see with the eyes of faith, your king dying for you? Do you see him now, risen and ascended and enthroned as king at God's right hand? As Paul says in Philippians 2 'Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.'

Because when you do see it it changes everything. When you see that Jesus Christ is king, you have him, by faith, for who he is, in all his glory, as your king, and not just his stuff like Zedekiah wanted. And in your heart and with your lips you say, Jesus is Lord. Not Caesar, not power, not possessions, not my pay check, not any other idol. He's my king, the king who loved me, and cared for me, and stepped into my place when I was poor and needy and far off. And when he's your king you can't help but care about justice and righteousness and the poor and the needy and the refugee. Not because you want to impress others, not because you want to get something from God, but because he's already given you everything in Christ, because your heart delights in what his heart delights in. So, in thought and word and deed you'll live as a citizen of that king.