Homecoming and New Covenant
Jeremiah 31:2-6; 10-15; 31-34

Much of Jeremiah's ministry has been taken up with the judgment he sees coming. But as we saw last week, his tone changes and he's looking ahead to what's coming after the judgment. And it's an extraordinary vision of the future. A vision that 2600 years later you and I can still get caught up in.

Reading: Jeremiah 31:2-6; 10-15; 31-34

We're going to look at three things: the promise of home, the reality of home, and the way back home.

The Promise of Home
A couple of years ago we read a story as a family. And you're reaching the end of the book, and you think two young people from opposite sides of the tracks are going to find each other and fall in love, and the plot's going to reach its climax, but they don't, and it didn't - it just fizzled out. And we sat there and said, that's rubbish. That's a terrible way to end.

And as Jeremiah's set out the devastation that's coming it's been doom and gloom for chapter after chapter. And if that was the end of the story - if Israel's relationship with God ended with Jerusalem reduced to rubble, with thousands dead or taken into exile, it would have been a terrible way to end, wouldn't it?

But Jeremiah makes it clear, it's not the end. And in verse after verse God sets out the future he has in mind. And it all begins in v3, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.'

In other words, you've not loved me, you've run after all these other gods, you've filled your life with all these other things, and look at the wreckage that they've wrought in your lives, but I have never stopped loving you.

And because God loves them with a love that never runs out, they've got a future beyond the rubble of their lives. Look at v4, 'Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel!' So, these exiles are going to return from Babylon and the land that lies in ruins, will rise again. Picture one of the bombed out cities at the end of the Second World War, or the Twin Towers after 9/11. That was what Jerusalem looked like after the Babylonians had finished with it, but God says, I will rebuild you. And that would be remarkable enough. But it's what God calls them that's extraordinary, isn't it? Virgin Israel.

You see, repeatedly, Jeremiah has likened them to an adulterous wife. God is their loving, faithful husband, but they've been having sex with whichever god they can get into bed with, and as a result they're shamed and scarred. But now, God says, in my eyes, you're going to be a virgin again. I'm going to remove your shame, and restore your honour. And you're going to be like a bride, dressed in white, coming down the aisle to her husband.

And as a result, the nation's going to flourish. Look at v4, 'Again you shall adorn yourself with tambourines and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.' In other words, you're going to party again. And v5, 'Again you shall plant vineyards… the planters shall plant and shall enjoy the fruit.' Verse 12, 'They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd.' The nation's going to prosper.

And in all that dancing and feasting and prosperity, their relationship with God is going to be restored: v6, 'For there shall be a day when watchmen will call in the hill country of Ephraim: 'Arise, and let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.' And there's going to be more dancing: v13, 'Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.'

And these are just metaphors, aren't they: Planting vines, drinking wine, singing, dancing, being radiant. He's trying to describe the indescribable: a future that only a picture of a community in joy-filled, happy, radiant, giddy, abundant celebration can come close to describing. I mean, I don't know about you, but I can't dance, but even my feet just begin to tap at the thought of this.

And then in v31-34 God promises that their return home is going to be capped with a new covenant. That just like he had rescued them from Egypt and entered into covenant with them at Sinai, so he's going to lead them out of Babylon and make a new covenant with them. And this time, rather than God's law being written on tablets of stone, v33, 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.' In other words, in the future, my people will obey me, but not just out of duty, but because they want to.

And then, v34, 'They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.' Now, someone might say to you, 'do you know so-and-so?' And you go, 'yeh, I know him.' Meaning you know *of* him, or you once shared a lift with him, or chatted about the weather. But when the Bible talks about *knowing* someone, what does it mean? It means you *really* know them, that they see into your heart and you into theirs. Like Genesis 4:1, 'Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain.'

So this is God promising to bring the people home and into a level of intimacy with him that they'd simply never known before. *And* it's not just going to be for the educated, for those types who read high-brow spiritual books; or for the *un*educated who don't know any better than get caught up in that kind of emotionalism. From the least to the greatest, they'll *know* me, God says.

And then, v34, 'I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.'

And that is some promise of a home coming, isn't it? But that's exactly the problem, because it never turned out that way. Did the exiles return to Jerusalem after 70 years and start rebuilding? Sure. But what Jeremiah describes here simply wasn't their experience.

The Reality of Home

Nehemiah was one of the key leaders who led the rebuilding of Jerusalem. But listen to part of a pray recorded in Nehemiah 9. The people are back in Jerusalem, and they'd expected freedom and prosperity, but listen to what they pray. Verse 36-37, 'Behold we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.'

Now, does that sound to you like the joy-filled party Jeremiah was talking about? And the answer's 'no'! Because they were still under the rule of the Persians who plundered the land. And after the Persians came the Greeks; and after the Greeks came the Romans.

And while the temple was rebuilt there was a huge sense of despondency as it was being rebuilt. Listen to the prophet Haggai as he tries to encourage the workers: ‘Who is left among you who saw this house [the temple] in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?’ (Haggai 2:3) So, far from the nation experiencing a revival, with their glory years ahead of them, they felt like slaves and their glory years were long gone.

So, the reality simply hadn’t lived up to the promise, had it.

And have you noticed how life’s like that? On a totally trivial level, have you ever gone back to the place you grew up and noticed how small it is? Some years back I went back to the village where I was born and brought up. And what struck me the most was the hill where I learnt to skateboard, because it wasn’t a hill at all. In my mind this was steep and dangerous. But in reality it was barely an incline. It was all a bit of a let down.

But think of less trivial stuff. Think about the stuff that promises to bring you home, that promises you that life of celebration, and joy, and prosperity, of life being good and you being in the place you were made for.

Brian Keenan was one of the Westerners held hostage in Beirut in the 1980s. And on his release, after four and a half years, he was asked what he’d do when he got back home to Ireland. And he said, 'I'm going to visit all the countries in the world, eat all the food in the world, drink all the drink in the world, and make love to all the women in the world.’

And often that’s how we think, isn’t it? Travel, the good life, some romantic relationship, lots of sex. That this will make my heart sing, this will make my feet dance, this will see me home, and make my life complete, this is what I’m made for. But it never quite works like that.

You think, if only I could find that special person and get married - that’d be home for me. But then you get married and after a while you realise that that special person isn’t quite so special, in fact you also discover you’re not so special; in fact, you’re both rather self-centred, and the fights start. And you want more than this one relationship can give you, than it promised you, but if you look for what’s lacking in someone else, other than your significant other, you create even more emptiness.

Or you think, if I could be a mum, or a dad, with beautiful blond children, like all those beautiful blond children at church, that would see me home. And you have some kids, but you discover that there are days when you go to bed feeling like an exhausted failure, and you’re just glad tomorrow is another day.

Or maybe you think career will see you home. This week I read a review of Chris Arnade’s book ‘Dignity.’ And Arnade made his money as a Wall Street banker before turning to photography and documenting the lives of America’s poor, who he calls - without meaning it in any way badly, the Back Row. But it was how Arnade describes America’s ‘front row’ that struck me. The Back Row, he says, are un- or under-employed, struggling, and powerless, but bound to a place that’s their home, and loyal. While, in contrast, the Front Row are educated, workaholic, powerful, upwardly mobile and global citizens, but they’re also rootless. And many of you know what that feels like, don’t you? Your education and your career have opened huge doors to you - but it comes at a cost.

Work intrudes into every corner of your life; relationships are stretched over thousands of miles; and you can't really say where home is.

When I go back to the UK, it should feel like I'm going home, but when I get there, after nearly 12 years here, I don't fit in. And when it's time to come back here I feel like I'm coming home, and yet I'll always be a foreigner.

So, does the pursuit of career promise you stuff and deliver on it? Sure - but it can also leave you rootless, can't it. It doesn't bring you home.

Or think of consumption and having more stuff. You see, even advertising sells you a message about home, doesn't it? Buy this car and you'll have the perfect family, lots of kids, blond kids, tumbling out of the car; or you'll have a beautiful partner sat next to you - or both! Or, use this hair product - if you have hair - and you'll have beautiful people falling at your feet. And yet, they never deliver what you're really after, do they? How could they? And in a few days you need the next new thing. Just this last month a survey reported that 89% of young people in Britain felt their lives have little or no purpose or meaning. 89%. They have more than ever, and yet they're more unhappy than ever.

So, we've been promised home, but it doesn't quite deliver and you're left hungry for something that will. But there's the thing. You see, if being hungry tells you you're empty, as CS Lewis said it also tells you that there is such a thing as food. That there is something that will satisfy you. Something that will see you home.

Look again at what Jeremiah says. Verse 12, 'their life shall be like a well watered garden.' Does that remind you of anything? Where in the Bible are we told of a garden that's well-watered? It's Eden. The place where life was as it should be. The place where Adam and Eve's relationship with each other and with God was as it should be. Home. And look earlier in v12, 'they shall be radiant over *the goodness of the Lord*.' And v14, 'my people shall be satisfied with my *goodness*.' And what word did God speak over creation and Eden? It's good, it's good, it's very good.

Or, listen to what the prophet Isaiah said about this same homecoming, Isaiah 35:1: 'The desert shall rejoice and blossom like a crocus' - the desert's going to become a garden. And 'the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.' (v5-6).

So the prophets are describing something way beyond a physical return to Israel, aren't they? They're talking about a return to Eden, of God healing all hurts and righting all wrongs, of God bringing not just these exiles but all humanity to the ultimate Home. To a place where, as one commentator puts it (Kidner) 'joys will no longer be fleeting or shadowed by fear.'

The question is, how can you get there? If that's the place you were made for, if that's the place where your hunger for *you're-not-quite-sure-what* will be filled, if that's the place where finally you can get off the plane, breath in the air and think, I'm home, how do you find it?

The Way Back Home

Did you notice the passage sandwiched between the promises of joyful homecoming, and that of changed hearts in a new covenant? A passage that's anything but full of joy. Verse 15, 'Thus says

the Lord: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”’

Now, the first time we hear of Rachel weeping is in Genesis 35. She’s the wife of Jacob, the patriarch, and she’s pregnant and goes into labour - but her labour’s hard and she knows she's going to die giving birth. And when her son is given to her, she calls him, Ben-oni, *son of my sorrow*. And she does die and Jacob buries her.

And now here in Jeremiah, Rachel has become the representative mother of Israel. And Jeremiah 40:1 tells us Ramah was used by the Babylonians as a staging post as they herded the exiles on their way to Babylon. And you can imagine the grief of the mothers who had watched their children slaughtered by the Babylonians. And Rachel weeps for her children.

But there’s a third time we hear of Rachel weeping. Jesus is born in Bethlehem and Herod the Great hears there’s a rival king of the Jews on the scene, so he orders all boys under the age of two in Bethlehem to be slaughtered. And in his gospel, Matthew writes, ‘Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children.” (Matt 2:17-18). But think: how does Jesus escape that slaughter? By his parents taking him into exile in Egypt.

But, that’s not the last time we read of women weeping in gospels, is it? As Jesus was led out to be crucified they lined the streets and wept for him. But here’s the thing, the writer to the Hebrews makes the point that Jesus was crucified outside the city gates, like someone exiled outside the camp. That, in effect, the rulers were casting him out, exiling him.

But it wasn’t only the rulers, was it? On the cross he cried out, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’ Why have you turned your face from me? Why have you cast me out?

Why? To bring you home. And on the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and said, this is my body broken for you. Then he took a cup and said, ‘this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’ (Luke 22:20). You see, in the old covenant, when God delivered the people from exile in Egypt, each family sacrificed a lamb and painted its blood on their doorposts, to protect them from the angel of death who passed over. And then they ate the Passover. And how were they to eat it? With their belt fastened and with sandals on their feet, and a staff in their hand, ready to leave. Why? Because God was bringing them home to the Promised Land.

And Christ went to the cross as our Passover lamb, that his blood might protect us from the death we deserve for our sins, so that in the words of Jeremiah, our iniquities might be forgiven and our sins be remembered no more. That we might experience the joy of the ultimate homecoming.

You see, Rachel wept and died, bringing forth new life. The mothers of Israel wept at Ramah, but it was the prelude to the rebirth of the nation. So, when the mothers wept at Bethlehem, and Matthew says ‘this fulfils that’, he’s saying, God is going to bring new life out of this death. And Jesus goes into exile, first to Egypt, but then at the cross, and he does it to bring us home.

You see, that passage in Hebrews 10 that we had read to us, quotes from Jeremiah about the new covenant, and then it says, that it’s through Christ’s sacrifice that we’ve been made perfect - that like Israel, through Jesus you’re made pure again. That your past, however stained by sin, can be

washed clean. And that because of him we have confidence to approach God. Or in Jeremiah's words, you can know God, intimately.

But it's also through Jesus giving himself for you that his law is written on your heart. Remember back in Jeremiah 17:1 the Lord said, "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their hearts."

But when you see Christ dying for you; when you see his love for you - the Son of God being cast out that you might be brought in, it does something to you, doesn't it? In response you love him. And God's commands go from being a duty, to a delight. And you find yourself wanting to do those things that please him. As William Cowper, the English hymn writer, wrote, 'To see the law by Christ fulfilled, And hear his pardoning voice, Changes a slave into a child, And duty into a choice.'

And do you remember how, earlier in Jeremiah, God described what it really means to know him? Jeremiah 9:24, "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." Or 22:16, "He [king Josiah] judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? declares the Lord."

So see Jesus giving himself for you, for you who don't deserve it, and begin to *know* him like that, and you'll give yourself to him. But you'll also give yourself for others - for the Back Row, for the poor and the needy. As Hebrews 10 tells us, 'consider how to stir up one another to love *and good works*... as you see the Day drawing near.' (Heb 10:24-25).

The day when God will finally make everything new. The day when Eden is finally restored, and we're finally home.