One Good Man
Jeremiah 4:5-6:30

We're looking at the book of Jeremiah, one of the great Old Testament prophets. And today we're going to look at parts of chapters 4, 5, 6. And it's graphic stuff.

Reading

We're going to look at 4 things: a perfect world, a broken society, a sounding alarm, and finally, one good man.

A Perfect World
Now, what kind of world do you want to live in? If you've got kids, what kind of world do you want them to grown up in? I remember being told once that just a generation ago there were villages in Switzerland where if you were going away, you'd leave your front door keys in the front door, so your neighbours would all know you were away. Now if you did that the only thing that would be left would be the front door.

And maybe you have this nostalgic idea of what life used to be like, and you'd like to see a return to the good old days, when children always obeyed their parents, like we did!

Or maybe the perfect world would be one in which England always won at rugby, and the Welsh or Scots or French put up a plucky defence but they always crumbled in the end.

But if we were to talk about it, at some point you'd bring up issues like social justice and the care of the vulnerable, or the level of violence and hatred, or the conduct of leaders. And I reckon all of us would want a society in which there is no wrong done, or if there was then those things would be punished justly. And we'd like a society where truth mattered and where the poor and needy were cared for - or better still where poverty was eliminated.

And politics is largely about trying to create such a world, isn't it. The problem is politicians can't agree on what that world looks like or how to get there. Is it through capitalism and the power of the market and individual responsibility; or is it through the interventionism and collectivism of socialism?

But the Bible presents a different vision. And one word that tries to express it is *shalom* - peace. Not just the absence of conflict, but a deep sense of well-being and harmony and prosperity in a community. Of a society where everything works as it should. And it's a peace that's built on something much deeper - the inner shalom, the inner rest of our hearts when we live in intimate relationship with God.

But that's where the wheels come off, isn't it? Because the human heart is anything but at peace and rest. And what Jeremiah tells us here is that whilst the people of God, the nation of Judah should have been an example to others of how to build a flourishing society, they were the opposite.

A Broken Society
Now in the middle ages, people used to talk of three *estates* that made up a functioning society. There was the first estate, the clergy, the church leaders, who prayed. Then there was the second

estate, the nobility, the knights, who fought. And then there was the third estate, everyone else, you and me, the peasants, who did all the work. But in Jeremiah's day, the three key offices were prophet, priest and king, with everyone else under them. But what becomes obvious here is that those offices, and Judah as a whole society, had totally lost its moral compass.

And God offers a stinging critique of it. Chapter 4:22, 'My people are foolish; they know me not; they are stupid children.' Now, have you ever had to look after a child who does something really immature, but that they think is really clever? Well, God says, that's Judah: You think you're really sophisticated but sadly you're the moral equivalent of kids at kindergarten.

And as a society they'd ceased to care about truth or what was right and wrong. And they mocked the idea that God might have something to say to them: chapter 6:10 - 'the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it.' And they laughed at anyone who said otherwise: chapter 5:13, 'The prophets will become wind; the word is not in them.' Don't listen to those who tell you how you're living is wrong, they're just a bunch of windbags, spouting a load of moral hot air.

And the parallels to today are striking: society has lost its moral compass, and don't tell us how to live. But just like today, it would have been tempting to see this as a problem for just one sector of society: it's them, over there, who are the problem. And that was Jeremiah's initial reaction.

Chapter 5:4-5: 'I said, "these are only the poor; they have no sense; for they do not know the way of the Lord, the justice of their God. I will go to the great." And that's like saying today look it's the fact that they're uneducated, or haven't had the life chances that others have that results in them behaving this way. And we could heal our broken society if only we invested in education or increased social provision.

But what Jeremiah discovered is that every strata of society was rotten, from bottom to top. 5:5, "I will go to the great and will speak to them, for they know the way of the Lord, the justice of their God." But they alike had broken the yoke; they had burst the bonds.'

And it's as if Jeremiah takes this mega-lumen flashlight and shines it on the sins of society's elite. Chapter 5:27, 'They have become great and rich; they have grown fat and sleek.' They're like the fat cat bankers of our recent financial meltdowns, or the 'some-animals-are-more-equal-than-others' of George Orwell's Animal Farm. And in their pursuit of power and position and profit the poor and defenceless have been trampled down: v28, 'They judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy.'

But yet again, it's not that the problem just lies at the top: sort out the rich, redistribute the wealth, and all will be well. Covetousness is not just a problem for the rich: chapter 6:13, 'From the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain.'

And Jeremiah sees that when a society loses its moral compass, and north becomes south and bad becomes good, then shame goes out the window. Chapter 6:15, 'were they ashamed…? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush.' And it's not for no reason that some commentators have labelled our current western culture as a shameless society, where the only thing to be ashamed of is, to feel any shame.

Now, in any healthy society there's a division of powers, isn't there, where one part can call out another part. And in Judah, of all people the religious leaders should have been the conscience of the nation. And yet, Jeremiah tells us, they too were compromised. Chapter 5:31 'the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; and my people love to have it so.' Chapter 6:13 'From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely.'

Now, there's an expression in surgery that says, 'if there's pus about, let it out'. Which is the nearest a surgeon ever comes to poetry. If a patient has an abscess, and a wound's become infected, you don't just leave it and say, 'Don't worry Mrs Smith, it'll get better on its own', instead the surgeon takes his knife and cuts open the abscess to let all that pus out. And that's what the people needed, spiritually, morally. For the religious leaders to say, if you live like this ultimately it will destroy you. But instead, they said, 'oh, there's nothing wrong with this kind of lifestyle. Let's put a little sticking plaster over this.'

Chapter 6:14, "They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying ;'peace, peace' when there is no peace." Judah, don't feel bad about your continual pursuit for more which tramples on the poor; don't feel guilty about your pursuit of personal freedom which means the defenceless go undefended, don't feel bad about your obsession with sex which leaves a trail of hurt. This is what the good life life looks like, this is *shalom*.

You see, it wasn't as if the society of Jeremiah's day was irreligious or unspiritual, it's that spirituality was a veneer, a thin layer that covered what was really going on in their hearts. Chapter 5:2, 'They say, "As the Lord lives", yet they swear falsely'. In reality, their spirituality was really just about giving them a spiritual leg-up, a spiritual boost, to enable them to carry on living just how they wanted to live.

And the question is, how come a society that was supposed to be a light to other nations could have got it so wrong? Well, even after just three weeks in Jeremiah, you can probably already guess the answer. Chapter 5:18, 'you have forsaken me and served foreign gods.' You see, when a society, worships the gods of money, or power, or success, or sex, and we think this is how I'll discover shalom, this is how I'll find the good life, then it's no wonder that we become more covetous, and the poor get trampled on, because we think having more will give us more. And if we worship the god of personal freedom and the power to choose for myself what's right and wrong, then it's no wonder that the vulnerable, the unborn or the elderly, get cast aside because they have no power; and if I think that personal success is the way to lasting personal happiness then no wonder relationships break down because I've got to get ahead of them, I've got to beat them in the race of life, if I'm to succeed; and if my personal happiness defines what's right and wrong, then no wonder truth finds no place.

And just like in Jeremiah's day, we too have prophets and priests around us - the celebrities, the chat show hosts, the social commentators, who tell us, you're ok, you're right, this is shalom.

And to bring home to Jeremiah just how broken society is from top to bottom, God sets Jeremiah a challenge. You've heard of geocaching? Where people run around the countryside, trying to find containers with little bits of treasure in them. Well, God sends Jeremiah off on a geocache. But instead of finding a little plastic toy hidden in a tree somewhere, he just has to find one good man in the city of Jerusalem. Chapter 5:1, 'Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth, that I

may pardon her.' Just one good man, and judgement can be avoided. You don't have to find an army, or even a platoon, you don't have to find a whole campus, or even a classroom full - you just have to find one good man. And he has Jerusalem - the city of God, the capital city of the people of God, to look in.

It's a reminder, isn't it, of Abraham's bargaining with God before the destruction of Sodom: if I find 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10 people who are good, will you destroy it? And God says, no, for the sake of so few I won't. And Jeremiah just has to find one. One man who hasn't bowed the knee to idols, who hasn't pursued stuff, or sex, or success as the thing that'll do it for him.

But in the words of Flannery O'Connor's short story, a good man is hard to find.

The apostle Paul writes, 'None is righteous, no, not one… for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' (Romans 3:10, 23). You see, it's so easy to point the finger at some group or other in society and say, 'they're the reason things are broken.' And God says, 'no, it's a level playing field before me.'

And despite walking the streets Jeremiah couldn't find that one man.

An Alarm Sounded

Now in our village, one day a year, they test the civil defence sirens. And the first time you hear their wailing you think 'what's that noise?' Well, it's a warning, it's supposed to get your attention, because if this was war, you're to run to the local bomb shelter and seek refuge.

And Jeremiah becomes the ancient equivalent of an air raid siren. That because of the nation's sin, God is bringing judgement upon them. Chapter 4:5-6 'Blow the trumpet through the land… for I bring disaster from the north, and great destruction.' And the new world superpower, Babylon, was going to invade from the north and destroy the nation.

Now, when you see photos of war zones, or concentration camps, we can see the horror of war. But that's in retrospect. Jeremiah has to convince the people of the horror of war and judgment in prospect. And in 4:7 he uses the image of a lion kill: 'a lion has gone up from his thicket'. Now, I don't know if you've ever seen a lion bring down an antelope, but there's not much left of the antelope afterwards - just the empty skin and a few bones. And Jeremiah says, that's what will happen to Judah, v7, 'your cities will be ruins, without inhabitant.' You're going to be left like a skin with all the innards ripped out.

But then he switches the image and in deliberate echoes of the opening verses of the Bible, he says, chapter 4:29, 'I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light.' And in Genesis, at creation, God brought light out of darkness and order out of chaos. But now, Jeremiah says, the light's going to be extinguished and out of order there's going to come chaos. And it's as if God is going to do a work of de-creation, and everything is going to come unstuck and unglued. But that's always what happens, isn't it? Our sin and our selfishness always create darkness and deserts. And those wastelands could be on a national scale, like here, or in failed states around the world; but it can also be in marriages and families and our individual lives. In one form or another, as Paul says, 'the wages of sin is death' (Rom 6:23).

Now, what does that kind of message do to you? Because you could hear that kind of thing and think, 'good, people are going to get what they deserve' and there's a kind of gloating over judgment. But not Jeremiah. In fact Jeremiah opens up about just what this message does to him and he's in anguish for the people. Chapter 4:10. 'I said, "Ah, Lord God, surely you have utterly deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, 'It shall be well with you,' whereas the sword has reached their very life.' And v19, 'My anguish, my anguish! [literally, my guts, my innards] I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent, for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war.'

Jeremiah sees what's coming and he feels sick to the bottom of his stomach. He feels like he could vomit. And his heart feels like it could explode under the emotional pain.

But just think about that. You see, whose emotions, whose grief for the people is he feeling? Because if a nation's at war, and the sirens start wailing, it's your own side who are giving you warning. But here, it's God who is sounding the alarm of impending judgement. Why? Because he wants them to flee to the bomb shelter of his protection. Because he's not their enemy, sin is. And Jeremiah feels the agony of impending judgment because God feels it. Because God longs for his people to turn back and truly find the shalom they're looking for.

But to experience that, they've got to do two things. Firstly, chapter 4:14, 'O Jerusalem, wash your heart from evil, that you may be saved.' As someone once said, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. And if the people are to experience the moral and societal transformation they need, then it's their hearts that need transforming. And that's just as true today as it was then.

But secondly, chapter 6:16, 'Thus says the Lord: "Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls."'

Now when you're out walking, or in the car, and you're lost, what do you do? And if you're married would your husband or wife do it differently. In my extensive experience I think there must be a little piece of genetic material on the Y chromosome somewhere that makes it biologically impossible for men to ask for directions.

And Judah is lost, and they need to get back on the right road, and God is telling them, there is an ancient path, there is a good way, and it's that path that will lead you to the deep inner rest you're looking for; the shalom, the all encompassing well-being, that can transform hearts and societies.

And it's because that possibility exists that in all the gloom of approaching judgment there are glimmers of hope, as twice God says, "I will not make a full end of you." (4:27, 5:18). They just have to come back to the path and have their hearts washed clean. The question is, how?

One Good Man

And Jeremiah was tasked with finding one righteous man, and judgment could be averted. One righteous man who could turn away God's wrath. One man who had never worshipped an idol, who had always been truthful, who had never gained at another's expense, who had always walked in the right path, who had never turned a blind eye to the Lord's commands, who had always been a person of integrity and whose faith had never been self-serving or shallow. Find that one representative man, and the nation could be pardoned. But there wasn't one.

In the last book of the Bible, in Revelation, John sees a vision of God on his throne, holding a scroll of the judgments that are going to be poured out on the nations, and the scroll's sealed. And an angel calls out "who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And John says that no one, in heaven or on earth was able to open it. It just needed one man, among all the greatest saints who ever lived, just one among the patriarchs, or the good kings, or the prophets, or the apostles, or the great and the good and the faithful, who was worthy to do it, but in all of human history there wasn't one. And John weeps. It's a picture of our utter brokenness and failure to ever be good enough. But then he hears a voice, "weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll.'

And Jesus came as that One Good Man. The one true priest, the one faithful prophet, the one great king, and one true Israelite, the Lion of the tribe of Judah. And he said, I'm the way, I'm that ancient path. It's in me you'll find shalom. And he quotes Jeremiah and says, 'come to me all you who are weary and heavy ladened, and I will give you rest, take my yoke upon you and learn of me and you will find rest for your souls.'

And at the cross, he took the judgement that was ours to bear. The One Good Man stepped into our place, and war was made against him, instead of us, so that we might be pardoned. And at the cross, the Lion became the lamb and was torn apart by the wild animals, and a full end was made of him, so that we might be made whole. His life was poured out to death, so that as we put our trust in him and not in our religious acts, our hearts might be washed clean. And in him we're counted worthy.

And as we understand how in his death and resurrection he's defeated the powers of sin and death that want to make our lives and our societies a wasteland, we'll turn from our idols and find in him that deep rest and inner peace these other things can never give us, and we'll love our neighbours in ways that build up society rather than destroy it.