Something to Boast About
Jeremiah 9:20-24

I became a Christian when I was around 16-17, through the influence of my Physics teacher, Mike Gouldstone. And in one of our conversations leading up to my conversion, Mike asked me whether I knew Margaret Thatcher, who was the Prime Minister of Britain at the time. Well, how do you answer that? I mean everyone knew Maggie – she and her handbag were known everywhere! She was so formidable how could anyone not know her! 'But you don't *know her*, do you', Mike would say. 'You know *of* her, you know her by reputation, you know her by sight, you know her by what other people say about her, but do you *really* know her?' And the answer of course, was 'no'. And you can probably guess what came next – Mike pointed out that the same is true for God. You can know lots about him, and everything you know and believe about him can be true – but do you *know* him – as in *really* know him? Not just know facts about him, but know him as a son knows his dad, as a friend knows his best mate.

Because that is the stunning news of Christianity, isn't it? That you and I can know God and be known by him, on this deep, personal, connected level.

And because that's true, we're starting a new series over the Summer called 'Who I Am?' and we're going to look together at what God says about himself, about his character and his nature, so that we can *know* him and know him better.

But to start the series, I want us to look at a passage in the prophet Jeremiah. And it's a well-known passage. But to understand it properly you need some context. And it's about 600BC – about 150 years before Nehemiah (which we finished last week) - and the people of Judah and her capital Jerusalem are being threatened by the rising superpower of the day – the Babylonian Empire. And within about 15-20 years, Jerusalem and her temple will be destroyed, and the people, including the political and religious elite, will either be dead or carried off into exile. So, it's into those critical times that Jeremiah speaks. And he warns the leaders and the people that because of their failure to honour God as God, and obey his law, disaster is coming.

Jeremiah 9:20-24

The Stuff of Boasts
Now, if you were given a list of character qualities or behaviours that you see in other people, and you had to score each characteristic according to how much you like it, and -10 meant you really despise it, and +10 meant you really like it, what score would you give boasting? How much do you like being around someone who is boastful? I bet it would get into the minuses, wouldn't it? I mean no one likes boasting, when it's someone boasting about how good they are.

Which makes what God says here through Jeremiah all the more strange, doesn't it? Because he doesn't say – 'don't boast, never boast!' Instead, he tells them that it's what they are boasting in that's wrong.

Just consider their situation. As the Lord's prophet, Jeremiah is acting like a Tsunami early warning system. He knows disaster and destruction are coming, and so he warns the people. And yet, instead of repentance and the people

turning to God, what Jeremiah hears is boasting. Verse 23, 'Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches."'

You see, up until now, Judah and Jerusalem have managed to stave off major attack by the surrounding foreign powers by a series of diplomatic alliances. Their politicians and statesmen had played the field, and despite being smaller and weaker and more vulnerable than surrounding nations, like Egypt or Babylon, they had successfully played their hand. So who needs to listen to some prophet telling them they needed to turn back to God, and listen to his word, when to date their political savvy, their wisdom, had kept them secure. They could sort this themselves. It was, as Jeremiah puts it here, the wise men boasting in their wisdom.

But if the politicians couldn't stave off attack through diplomacy, there was always the army, wasn't there? And Judah had a large army. Sure, it wasn't as big as Babylon's, but Jerusalem, Judah's capital was a fortress. And she'd withstood the siege of the Assyrians years before. So they're attitude was, 'Come on guys, we don't need to worry, we're impregnable.' In other words, if the wise could not avoid the war, the strong could most certainly fight it, so why listen to this prophet? It was the mighty man boasting in his might.

But of course, wars cost money don't they? And if Judah was to stand and hold out against the military might of Babylon, then resources would be needed. And the good news was that Judah was flourishing, or at least the rich in Judah were flourishing, and business was booming and confidence was strong. The money was there. It was, as Jeremiah puts it, the rich man boasting in his riches.

Now, we are far removed from 6th Century BC Jerusalem, aren't we? And yet those three things – wisdom, power and wealth still have the ability to turn heads, don't they. They are still qualities we admire. The wise, the powerful, the wealthy are still the movers and shakers today.

And yet, it's not as if you have to be in the ruling elite for these things to be where you put your trust.

I mean, just think for a moment: what is it that you boast in, in the sense that Jeremiah uses it here? Because here, boasting is about where the people are putting their confidence. What is it they're trusting in? So think about it, do you ever find yourself boasting, or putting your confidence in your wisdom? And at first glance, you'll almost certainly say, 'no'. None of us go round saying, 'I am so wise, and you may call me St Martin-the-wise' do we. But what about intelligence? Do you assess yourself and how you're doing, especially in comparison to others, by how bright you are, or they are? By how many papers you've had published and in what journals? Or by your grades at college? Or by what college you went to? Or maybe, more subtly, do you ever consider yourself doing better than others because you're not making the kind of mistakes they are in parenting, or in life decisions, that you're wiser than that. Or bringing it closer to what's going on here in Jeremiah, do you ever read or hear what the Bible has to say on something and dismiss it, or if not dismiss it, quietly ignore it, because,

well, that was then and now's now, and frankly I think I know better? Better than the word of God.

And what about power? Now, sure, as an individual, you're not putting your confidence in, or bragging about the size of your armed forces. But if these people thought themselves impregnable, does power do the same for you? If you're in a position of leadership at work, do you get a kick from that, do you feel a certain security, or good about yourself, because of your position? Or for some of the younger guys, or maybe even the not so young, do you ever find yourself glorying in your sport, in your physical strength, your physical ability, or your competitiveness? That this is you – how good you are in this area.

And then there are riches. And there's a fascinating example of the power wealth has to turn our heads in the letter of James. He gives the example of two people who come to the same church, but who are dressed very differently – one is obviously rich, whilst the other is poor. How do you treat them? James asks. If you welcome the rich man and treat him with more honour than the poor man, you've blown it. But think what's going on there: when we behave like that we are assessing someone's *worth* based on their *wealth*. And if we see others like that, we are very likely to see ourselves the same way – that we feel good about ourselves, we feel confident, when we feel like we've made it. Or we have enough in reserve. Or we're dressed well. Or the house or car can impress, and we feel good about that. And if you're just starting out – there's always this pull that you pursue wealth and financial success, because this will give you that sense of being ok, of succeeding, that you're after.

And through Jeremiah the Lord says, this is not the stuff that you're to boast in.

Now, none of this is bad in and of itself. Wisdom, power, wealth can all be God's gracious gifts. But Jeremiah is saying, this is not where you should seek your confidence or your security. This is not what should define you.

But before we look at where he says we should find that, just ask yourself, why do we boast about stuff in the first place? What's underneath our boasting?

The Need Beneath the Boast

Well, think about what boasting is. When we boast we are so pleased with ourselves in some area, that we speak it out. Boasting is this overflow of emotion – we feel so good about this, we feel so good about ourselves, that we tell someone else.

So, strangely, at the root of boasting there is often insecurity. There is this need to have others see how good we are and affirm us. After all, the reason 6th Century Jerusalem was boasting in wisdom, power and wealth was because they were feeling threatened. And the same can be true for us. We need to feel significant, we need to feel like we matter, that we count for something. We need to feel like we stand out, or are better than other people. I mean no one ever boasts that they can boil a kettle do they? Or past a certain age, tie their shoelaces. Why? Because everyone can do that! We boast about the stuff that sets us apart.

And so the need beneath boasting is this need for significance. That I can feel confident about myself. And the reason we speak it out to others is because we want them to see that, we feel this need to be significant to others. We want them to think we're great, to esteem us. And then, their affirmation of us will make us feel even better about ourselves. So, maybe bizarrely, behind the boast is this need to want others to approve of us, and not reject us.

The problem is of course that the stuff we boast in, the stuff we find our confidence in, whether that's intelligence or power or wealth or whatever it is for you, was never designed to bear that kind of weight. And the moment you meet someone who is cleverer than you, or you lose your position, or you injure yourself, or the money runs out, your sense of self-worth can crumble, and you discover that now you've got absolutely nothing to boast in any more. Which is just what happened for these 6th century Jews when Judah and Jerusalem were overrun and destroyed by the Babylonians. Their boasting was rapidly silenced.

But as we saw, it's not that God does not want us to boast. He does. He wants you to boast and to brag and to crow and to exult and to glory, in something. He wants your heart to be so full that you have to tell others. He wants the emotion and the happiness and the sense of goodness and wellbeing in your life to be so great that it overflows into others. So, it's not that boasting is wrong, it's what you boast in that matters.

The Never-Ending Boast

Verse 24, 'But 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.'

So, when Judah and Jerusalem were threatened, they weren't to fall back upon their own abilities to defend themselves or stay secure, but to realise that their ultimate confidence, security and wellbeing lay in God, and in knowing him. That if they were going to boast, they should boast about the depth of their knowledge and understanding of God.

But wouldn't that be just another form of pride? If I were to go round bragging about my knowledge of God, wouldn't it be just as pretentiousness as if I went round bragging about how fast I could run? Or how much I earned? Absolutely. You see, if you pursue a theological knowledge of God or a superior understanding of doctrine *for it's own sake*, it will just make you proud. And you will look down your nose at lesser mortals who don't know as much, or who are less spiritual than you. Worse still, you will think that you know lots about God, while all the time you haven't even begun to know him. Because it's still *you* and *your knowledge*, your *wisdom*, that you're boasting in.

But when you pursue God for himself, when you set your heart and your mind to grow in the knowledge of his love and his grace and his mercy and his holiness and his anger and his forgiveness and his power and his presence, then that kind of knowing God can never make you proud. In fact, it will profoundly humble you, as you realise that far from you being the wise, powerful, rich one, it's God who has all the wisdom and power and wealth. And that kind of knowledge of

God will never cause you to boast in yourself or your superior knowledge, rather it will result in awe-filled praise and worship – glorying, boasting – in God and his grace to you who don't deserve it, and never in yourself. After all, how could you ever boast in yourself again, when you have come face-to-face with God?

And just think what a growing knowledge of God does for how you see yourself and where your confidence and security really lies. You see, all the time you are looking in on yourself, or out at other things for your sense of wellbeing, it's like building the house of your life on quicksand – because these things are always shifting and changing. But when you begin to know God, and his never-changing love for you in Jesus, you're not going to be shaken when the sands of life start to shift.

When you know that Jesus knows you right to the core, all the bad as well as the good, and yet loves you so much that he would die for you; when you know that God knows you as you really are, and not just the image you project for others, but accepts you because of what Jesus has done for you at the cross, then you have a confidence in life that can never be shaken. When you know that by faith you are united with Christ, and though you could never make the grade to be acceptable to God, Jesus has done it for you, your heart is filled with joy in place of guilt. And when you know that your heavenly Father calls you his child no matter what others say about you, then you will have a rock solid, deep, inner security.

You see, all the time you are looking elsewhere for your sense of inner confidence, all the time you ignore God or pay lip service to him only, the world is going to be frustrating and confusing and full of pain. But when you know God, and grow in your knowledge of God, and begin to understand how he is weaving his story in your life, then everything else begins to fall into place.

But that can only come by growing in your knowledge of God. It's why the apostle Paul wrote, 'I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' (Phil 3:8). You see, it's only by knowing Christ and being known by him, that this inner need for acceptance and approval and significance and worth that lies under our boasting can be answered and satisfied. Because you realise you don't need to prove yourself any more. It's why in the same passage in Philippians, Paul says that everything else that might make him feel good about himself – his racial background, his education, his moral record were all rubbish, donkey dung, compared to Jesus. And when he has to write to the church at Corinth, who were boasting in all the wrong things, he quotes this passage from Jeremiah, as he says, 'no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."' (1 Cor 1:29-31).

So, why not make this summer a summer of growing in your knowledge of God. Through the sermon series, through your Bible reading, and reading of books, make this a summer of pursuing God – a real, heart knowing. Because then, all of us really will have something to brag about, except it won't be about us, but about how great and glorious and gracious our God is.