## Jeremiah 2

(in Fuller)

Last quarter we had Alan Roxburgh giving the SWM lectures in the chapel slot, and I thought he said the most important things I had heard said in Fuller in my five years here. He invited us to face up the fact that our evangelical Christian way of thinking has been taken over by non-Christian ideas and assumptions. He said, in fact, that we are in a position like the exiles in the Old Testament. Now at *that* point, I think that as an Englishman who moved to Canada, he was right about Britain and right about Canada, but he wasn’t *quite* right about the USA. God has cast off the church in Europe, and it is in exile as a pathetic remnant of what it once was. That’s been a repeat of the way God cast off the church around the Eastern Mediterranean in the first millennium, the church where Paul ministered, and Athanasius, and Augustine. God hasn’t yet done that to the church in the USA, but God is about to do it. The church in the USA is on the way to becoming the same pathetic remnant as the church in the Eastern Mediterranean and the church in Europe. It’s not there yet but it’ll be there within a generation. We aren’t living in 580 BC, in the exile itself, but we *are* living in 620 BC – that is, the time of Jeremiah and Hananiah and Huldah and Josiah.

Now in one sense it doesn’t matter if the church in the USA finds itself in exile. We heard two weeks ago that there are more Presbyterians in Korea than in the USA. The collapse of the church here won’t matter in the big scheme of things. As we are often told, God is simply passing on the gospel baton to the church in Asia or Latin America or Africa. But we live in the context of the little scheme of things, and for us what happens to the church in the USA does matter. I don’t know whether it’s possible to change the way things are working out, but I do know that we need to think about the situation and about how to respond to it.

We are living in the time of Jeremiah. There in Jeremiah 2, in that passage we read, is the bones of Jeremiah’s assessment of the situation, which also applies to ours.

Israel is shrinking rather than growing. *Is Israel a slave?*  *Is he a homeborn servant?* Jeremiah asks. If not, *Why has he become plunder?* Why is he being treated as somebody who doesn’t count? In Jeremiah’s time Israel has been getting smaller and smaller. Jeremiah himself came from the north, and the northern kingdom as a whole was taken off into exile a century before. Now peoples around such as the Edomites have been gradually encroaching on Judah’s territory and people such as the Egyptians have been encroaching on Judah’s freedom.

Here, we live in a culture where the church has ceased to have the importance in national life or cultural life or intellectual life that it had in the past, and where Christian faith doesn’t mean anything to vast numbers of people. When people like Roxburgh talk about the church being in exile, this is the kind of thing they mean. In this sense we *are* in exile already.

Jeremiah says there’s a reason for Judah’s decline. Now when things go wrong, it doesn’t have to be God’s punishment – it could be just one of those things about how history works out, or it could be God’s testing us in some way, or God refining us, or God challenging us to prayer. Remember from Job that just because things go wrong it doesn’t mean you are guilty. But in *his* context Jeremiah *doesn’t* see it as merely the result of chance forces or as one of those other things, and neither do I when I look at us in our context. Indeed, the situation is similar, and the reasons are similar. There were three things that were wrong with the people in Jeremiah’s day, and we have the same three problems. We have given up on the gospel. We have lost touch with God’s written word. And we think that the culture has the solution. We don’t acknowledge any of those, of course, as people may not have done in Jeremiah’s day.

They had given up on the gospel. *I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness*, God says (v. 2). When we first got married, says God, it was great. But then *What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me?* (v. 5). They got into the promised land and they turned away from me, the God who had brought them out of Egypt and looked after them in the wilderness and brought them into the promised land. *They did not say, where is Yahweh, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness… I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things* (vv. 6-7). But they have forgotten all that. They have forgotten the gospel. By the gospel I mean the story that tells of what God has done. The gospel is a story, and piece of news, a collection of facts. In a broad sense the gospel is the story of God’s creating the world and delivering Israel and sending Jesus to live and die for us and raising him from the dead. In Jeremiah’s day it’s in particular the story of God bringing the people out of Egypt and looking after them through the wilderness and taking them into their promised land. They have stopped thinking and talking about that story. They have forgotten the gospel.

There is something else. They have given up on God’s written word. *The priests did not say, “Where is Yahweh?” The people who handle the Teaching,* the Torah, *did not acknowledge me* (v. 8). There was something wrong with their relationship with the Torah, the written word of God. The written word of God wasn’t shaping their relationship with God and their lives.

Why? How could that happen? They thought the culture had the answer, and they assimilated to it. What apparently happened was this. The pressures of everyday personal needs made them turn from Yahweh to the Baals, the traditional gods of the culture. Israel needed a god who could make crops and flocks and herds grow, and families grow. Yahweh had brought them out of Egypt, but that was a long time ago, and it didn’t look very relevant to everyday life now. What they needed now was someone who could make the ground fertile, a God who was relevant to everyday life. Could Yahweh do that? Baal specialized in it. The pressures of everyday needs made them stop thinking about the story that made them who they were and had the power to keep them, and stop thinking about the written word of God and the way it was designed to shape them. They gave up on the gospel, they gave up on the God’s written word, and they assimilated to the culture.

I suggest that it is parallel factors that are destroying the church in our context. Our everyday needs are different, but the result is the same. If you are an Israelite, you can’t take for granted where the next meal is coming from – or at least, you can’t take for granted where next *year’s* meals are coming from. We know where the next meal is coming from – we are going to Amy’s. But we have other everyday needs and we don’t know how they will be met. I don’t mean how we will make ends meet financially, though that is a question for many of us. I mean how will we make ends meet with regard to our inner needs. Where will I get my significance? What can I do to make myself feel that I count? Where can there be someone who cares about me and understands me? Where can I find intimacy? A Russian visitor once described us as a well-fed prison camp. We have everything we need materially – housing, food, computers, cars, entertainment. But inside, we are isolated and empty.

Worship then becomes the way we deal with our emptiness and our isolation. That’s what we look to it for ourselves, and how we try to make it attractive to other people. And that’s not wrong, just as looking to Yahweh as the one who could make the crops grow wouldn’t be wrong. The problem is, this becomes the main thing about worship. It becomes the nature of the gospel, as we understand it. Worship is designed to make us feel good. The point about God is to make us feel good. Instead of creating an alternative community we simply mirror the majority community. And our worship does that. So worship, for instance, abandons the reading of scripture, because that’s boring, isn’t it. It abandons reference to the gospel story, because that happened a long time ago, and it doesn’t look very relevant. So you can go through a whole worship service without there being any reference to the gospel events – the fact that God created the world, and delivered Israel, and sent Jesus to live and die for us, and raised him from the dead. The Israelites had forgotten the gospel and given up on God’s written word because they were so concerned with their personal needs. The same thing has happened to us.

There’s a tragic paradox here. What we need is to be brought out of ourselves by seeing our lives set in the context of a bigger picture, a bigger story, the gospel story. But we are so overwhelmed by our emptiness and our isolation and our insignificance that we don’t pay attention to this bigger story. All we want to do inside church as outside church is think about ourselves in our need. Scripture and the gospel are boring and irrelevant. So we turn God into someone whose focus is on meeting those needs.

And that isn’t exactly wrong. But we try to short-circuit the process whereby God gives content and meaning to our lives. We make God a quick fix for our needs. But quick fixes don’t work. The only fix that works is the gospel story and the scriptures where we find that story. But in worship we have given up on those.

Rainer Albertz in his *History of Israelite Religion* has this interesting theory about the Israelites and Baal. When the prophets talk about the Israelites worshiping Baal, he reckons that often they didn’t mean the people were consciously worshiping Baal instead of Yahweh. What they had done was unconsciously change their way of thinking about Yahweh so that they thought about Yahweh as if Yahweh were Baal. That’s is a good image for what we do. We use the same words our forebears used, we use the words God and Lord and Jesus, but the content we read into them comes from the contemporary context. I often reflect on the fact that a new age person could come into worship and find 90% or even 100% of what we say and do quite acceptable. We are scratching where we itch. But when you have a serious itch, you need more than scratching to put it right.

Here is Jeremiah’s image for that. *My people have committed two evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water* (v. 13). They hadn’t got mains water, remember, so they have two alternatives water supplies. The best thing is a well from which you can always get fresh water. But if you haven’t got a well you have to make do with a tank where you collect water in the winter and use it up during the summer. The vital thing then is that the tank is waterproof. If the tank leaks, that has devastating implications, deathly implications. Your water is gone and it may be months before it rains, and you can’t just steal from Edwards Valley or the Colorado River. Now, imagine how stupid it would be to give up using a natural spring and choose to rely on a tank, and specifically a tank that leaks. Why would you do that?

That’s Jeremiah’s image for what happens when you make up your own religion. So we come to worship and give expression to our individual sad selves and hope that will make us feel better, but it does nothing of the sort. We leave just as sad as when we arrived. We think that more of the same is the solution. If we make the worship livelier, it will work. But we’re trying to get a drink from a tank with no water in it. We’ve focused on our immediate felt needs and given up on the gospel story that made us what we are. We are focused on me, rather than on God, scripture, the church, and the gospel. We have assimilated to the culture, as Israel did. We’ve forgotten the big picture. We think the gospel is just about me and God. Especially about me.

We need to turn back. We need to turn away from our preoccupation with ourselves and our individual journey, to God and God’s journey. We need to turn back from our preoccupation with ourselves to God and from our individual story to God’s story. Jeremiah wants the people to do that. He wants them to remember their gospel story again and see how it relates to their needs. *They did not say, “Where is Yahweh, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of drought and deep darkness?” And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things*. He is not saying “forget about your needs, about the need for your crops to grow, and just think about God.” He is not polarizing right away from them. He is saying that they need to bring their needs and the gospel story together. The gospel is always contextual. The Reformation wasn’t just a restatement of the New Testament but an application of the gospel to a context. Nineteenth-century evangelicalism wasn’t just a restatement of the New Testament but an application of the gospel to a context. But in the third millennium we have given up on the gospel and just baptized the context. No wonder the tank is empty.

It is 620 BC not 580 BC. It is possible for the church at this moment to do what Jeremiah and the Reformers and the nineteenth-century evangelicals did, and bring together gospel and context rather than continuing to abandon the gospel. It is possible. I don’t think this will happen. I think the church in the USA will be as dead in a generation as the church in North Africa and the church in Europe. But it’s not over until it’s over.

What should you and I do? Here is one answer. Every time you go to a service ask where the focus lies. Does the focus lie on God or does it lie on me – on what I need and what I can contribute? Ask whether the scriptures were read – not just two verses, either. Do you get the impression that the scriptures are a key resource for this worshiping community? And ask whether you heard the gospel. Did you here about the fact that God created the world and delivered Israel and sent Jesus to die for us and and raised him from the dead? Did the service bring aspects of this story alive so that you could see that this story was the story in light of which we can live our little stories?

If the answer to any of those questions is yes, say thank you to the ministers. If the answer is no, tell them that this is what you come to church for. And of course if you are the minister, make those the criteria by which you evaluate yourself.