

# The Bishop of Winchester

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The Diocese of  
Winchester



THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND

Trinity College Cambridge

JEREMIAH

Sunday evening, October 14<sup>th</sup> 2007

It is a privilege to be here with you tonight; and a demanding privilege to have been able to choose Jeremiah when asked to name an Old Testament book within this series of sermons.

One of our sons was travelling in Northern Uganda while my wife and I were at the Lambeth Conference in 1998. He was going to a town in the area terribly oppressed by the Lord's Resistance Army. I asked its Ugandan bishop, whose own wife had been killed by a land-mine in the previous year, how our son would find things there. His answer has stayed in my mind: "Your son will find it very pathetic".

The Bishop was using the word in its older sense, which the OED notes first: "pathetic: producing an effect on the emotions, affecting, moving, distressing".

Reading Jeremiah is, and is more and more, for me a "pathetic" experience in that sense of the word: affecting, telling, alarming, convicting..... I'm going to try to share the heart of this with you, to tell you "why?".

I first need to let you know at least something about the man, his times and the book that bears his name. Jeremiah was active in public life in Jerusalem from the 620s BC to the 580s, a cataclysmic period for the little Kingdom of Judah, its kings and its people. In 721 Assyrian power had captured Samaria, Judah's larger sister-kingdom to the north; and twenty years later (the time of king Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah) Jerusalem only narrowly escaped the same fate, to survive as a client-state of the super-power Assyria. The next decades were tumultuous; and Jeremiah began to speak in the name of God at a desperately critical time, made no less threatening for Judah by Babylon's climactic overthrow of Assyria in 609. First in 597, and again more comprehensively in 586, Jerusalem was taken and sacked; and anyone who was anyone was killed, or marched off to Babylon (in what is now Iraq, where its ruins have been further ruined by the American military). The last sight that the book gives us of Jeremiah, is as he is himself taken off, in or after 586, by one of the surviving Judaeans warlords, and against his own will and advice, to Egypt.....

And the Book that bears his name, all 52 chapters of its poetry and prose - how much is attributable to "the historical Jeremiah", and how much from others through perhaps the next 250 years? The experts differ, and there is no way of being sure; but I think two things can be said. There are passages of vivid, *pathetic*, immediacy, full of rare words, striking turns of phrase and observation, and shot through by a man's fearful struggle to express not only the agonising and horror of a person at what he sees around him, but that too of God - God's astounded, shocked disappointment at his people's rejection of him, disobedience to him, and the consequences of these. We heard it in this evening's passage:

**"Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water."** (2.12-13)

And those who came after Jeremiah, who arranged and developed and commented on those sharp-edged jewels - and sometimes blunted them! - they did so because the basic message seemed to them to speak to their times too.....as it seems to me, to my alarm, to speak to ours....

As I have read Jeremiah in these last years especially, I have found myself drawn to reflect more than ever before on human sinfulness and on God's righteous judgement; on our and my accountability before God whether as humankind, as a nation or an alliance, as a church, as a generation or as an

individual; on where Jeremiah sees “a future and a hope” to lie for God’s people and for humanity as a whole; and so on the calling of the church, and of its leaders, in these years.

Specifically, through reading Jeremiah I have glimpsed more immediately than ever God’s horror and distress at the treatment by the rich of the poor, within our own country and between North and South, between “first world” and “two-thirds world”; God’s horror and distress at the effects over generations of our pillaging behaviour as colonial and military powers upon Africa, the Middle East, Asia - and upon the whole created environment; God’s horror and distress at the range of sexual activities that our culture has come to accept as normal, and which we have exported across the world; God’s horror and distress at the “burning incense to false gods” that is more and more explicitly and proudly the ground and root of our society; God’s horror and distress at the failure to respect his will, and to speak in his name to ordinary people, of political and religious leaders; and God’s horror and distress at our failure over centuries, and still today, clearly to engage as Christians with the range and depth of this – of our - sinfulness.

Let me be specific from this evening’s Readings from Jeremiah and John – and from just two current situations, chosen because each has occupied my own attention and concern this last week.

Jeremiah uses the classic, traditional, everyday imagery of the vine to depict Israel as God’s vine, Gods planting. Isaiah had done so, three generations earlier:

**“Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill; he dug it...and planted it with choice vines....; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes;...the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry of distress.”** (Isaiah 5.1-7)

And in tonight’s Jeremiah:

**“Long ago you broke your yoke and burst your bonds, and you said, “I will not serve!”.....You sprawled and played the whore. Yet I planted you as a choice red vine, a true stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?”**

In the Greek translation of this verse, there are the very words used in John 15: **“I planted you a true, fruitful vine.....”**; and I find that well-known John 15 sounding different, much more challenging and convicting and urgent, in this light – if **“I am the true vine...”**, and all that follows about pruning and abiding, carries even echoes of this urgent sharpness of meaning and appeal, even echoes of **“How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?”**

This week the words strike home to me at two points in particular.

They strike home to me as a Bishop of the Church of England and of the Anglican Communion, as the screen of my lap-top, and my telephone, is alive – as it has been for too many years – with the increasingly imminent splitting apart of the Anglican Communion – because Europeans and North Americans don’t like being told – in my judgement rightly - by Africans and Asians that we’re deserting the faith and the morals that their grandparents learned from ours. Jeremiah saw it in his time: **“Stand at the cross-roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, “We will not walk in it””**. (6.16)

And the words strike home to me as a British citizen, but also as a member of the Upper House of Parliament, in the face of this country’s, this Government’s, Asylum legislation and practice; I have spent two days this week on the Report stage of the UK Borders Bill, the seventh or eighth attempt to resolve contradictions and perceived loopholes in legislation on these pressing questions. We did not succeed in getting the Children Act, or the UN Convention on the Right of the Child, to have effect with regard to children in Detention Centres or more generally within the asylum process. **“The fear of me is not in you, says the Lord of hosts.”** (2.19)

But Jeremiah does not in the end despair. He sees **“a future and a hope”**, in spite of everything, and the other side of the demolition of even the most overwhelming of super-powers, because he is sure that the righteous God wills and longs for the Shalom, the well-being of his creation and of humankind. But God’s way to it, for individuals and families, nations and churches, lies through **“turning”** back to God, through repentance and a new obedience, through remembering and not forgetting God, through what he calls **“the circumcised heart”** devoted to knowing and praising God – and what St. John calls **“Abiding in the Vine”**.