

TRUE TO OURSELVES/TRUE TO GOD

Aim: To help participants to be honest about who they are, their attitudes and feelings, their strengths and weaknesses; and to see that in times of discouragement, God will always be faithful to his word.

The workshop takes the form of a character study on Jeremiah. In order to gain insights, it is necessary to understand a little of what is happening in Israel during his ministry and to study his writing quite closely.

BEFORE YOU COME

Read Jeremiah 1 and Psalm 139. Compare these two passages and reflect - How do they resonate with your own sense of call to mission and service? It would also be useful to read the sections (below) on history and Jeremiah - the man. The study itself should begin with one of the hymns, prayer and Warm Up Activity

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY:

Jeremiah's World

The prophecies of Jeremiah take place during one of the most catastrophic times in Jewish history and were given during the reign of five kings – two of whom ruled for a very short time. Jeremiah first comes on the scene when King Josiah was attempting to reform Israel by getting rid of foreign cults and rebuilding religious life. King Josiah's aim was also to reunite the Northern and Southern kingdoms of Israel that had been divided since just after King Solomon's reign. He also resisted the influence and threats of the Assyrian Empire which had dominated the Middle East for over 200 years. Unfortunately, Josiah died trying to prevent the Egyptians and the failing Assyrian Empire from forming an alliance in 608 BC, so his enlightened policies were never established.

After the short reign of one of Josiah's sons (Jehoahaz, who was removed by the Egyptians) his brother Jehoiakim was crowned and it soon became clear that the new and real enemy of Israel was the expanding Babylonian Empire. Jehoiakim, was no more than a puppet king, first to the Egyptians and when their power was fading in the face of Babylon, he became a vassal of the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah succeeded his brother in 597 BC. He was a weak leader, and although he was temperamentally favourable to Jeremiah, but he was foolish enough to submit to the pressure of his leading ministers, and declare his independence of Babylon. By doing so, he drew upon himself the very onslaught he had sought to avoid. Jerusalem was besieged to the point of starvation; the Babylonian army breached its walls in 586 and destroyed the palace and the Temple. Zedekiah was captured and his sons murdered. The fall of Jerusalem and the exile seemed to be the end of the chosen people. The promises made to the fathers seem to be no longer capable of fulfilment. The situation in Jerusalem was precarious and terrible. The land was a wilderness and the people were scattered. A group fled to Egypt and effectively began a substantial Jewish settlement which continued into the Christian era. They probably took Jeremiah with them and he died in Egypt.

627 BC Jeremiah receives his call. The last great King of Assyria (Ashurbanipal) dies

621 BC King Josiah of Judah (the Jews have been reduced to the tribe of Judah with Jerusalem as their capital) begins his reforms to encourage people to follow God. These ensued from the discovery of "the Book of the Law" in the Temple. It was probably a large section of the book of Deuteronomy. (2 Kings 22)

612 BC Nineveh, capital of Assyria falls to the Babylonians

609/08 BC Egyptians march north to bolster Assyria, Josiah intercepts them and is killed at Megiddo (Armageddon) The Pharaoh Neco deposes the new king and places his brother Jehoiakim, on the throne of Judah

605 BC Egypt is defeated by Babylon

598 BC An alliance between Israel and Egypt brings Babylonian forces to Judah. The third son of Josiah (Zedekiah) becomes a puppet of Babylon.

588 BC Zedekiah, who favoured alliance with Egypt, breaks faith with Babylon and Jerusalem is besieged, eventually being sacked and its people deported to Babylonian exile in 587/6. Jeremiah is taken to Egypt.

THE GROUP WORKSHOP

A song to begin: "O loving Lord, who art forever seeking" "Great is thy faithfulness".

Prayer; Lord, remind us of the truth that if we would be lights in the world we must endure the burning.
(from The Philippines)

'WARM UP' ACTIVITY

Invite each group member to take a sheet of A4 paper and draw a horizontal line across the page. Mark 0 on the left hand side of the line, 5 in the centre and 10 on the right hand edge of the line. Explain that 0 will represent 'no problem' ; 5 will represent 'reasonably challenging but okay' and 10 will represent 'No way' / 'I'd be scared out of my wits'. Ask people to mark a symbol for each of the circumstances the leader calls out, somewhere along the line – to indicate how challenging they would find each of these tasks.

- a. Parachuting
- b. Preaching
- c. Looking after a new born infant
- d. Deep sea diving
- e. Working in an accident and emergency ward
- f. Going as a missionary to a foreign land

Ask people in pairs, or threes, to compare and discuss their ratings!

Then explain that as Jeremiah is considered, it will be evident that he was a person who faced difficult challenges and was honest with himself and with God about his own emotions .

GETTING TO KNOW JEREMIAH – THE MAN

Take a few minutes to read the following description of Jeremiah the man, and when you have done so, go to a F/C and write one or two adjectives that help us understand something about him – your words can either be taken from the following script, or words that come to you as you read the description ...

As this potted history shows, Jeremiah lived through turbulent and frightening times. The chosen people bolstered by stories of old heroes, expected that God would see them through any difficulty. Jeremiah's task was to declare the terrible fate he saw in store for the nation. His sombre message has led to his being branded a pessimist, but he was honest with himself, committed to God's calling on his life and grieved that his message was stubbornly resisted by his peers.

Unusually for a prophet, the life of Jeremiah is very well documented, His own writing builds a picture of a very complex, gifted yet flawed human being. His poetry expresses his emotions in imaginative and powerful ways. His changing moods and tempers are freely expressed giving us a most intimate self-disclosure. Such expressive writing is unrivalled anywhere in Jewish literature. Indeed he is so preoccupied with his inner world that personal sudden outcries intrude into his prophecies. (For example Jeremiah 4 is a prophecy-poem describing the coming war, but we see Jeremiah's own thoughts in the middle of God's word Jer 4:10, 19-21, 23-26). He is a man who is aware of his own humanity and weakness and yet he is called by God to be a prophet and a leader of the people.

He is a very sensitive man who quickly responds to the changing circumstances and fortunes of the world around him. He is able to set down in words what he sees and suffers as well as all that has come to him from God, even if that revelation offends his own self-centredness and pride. Throughout his life he suffered the torment of being set apart from others, and was even denied the comfort of a wife and family life.

He was sustained by an awareness of God's presence, inconstant and fleeting though it often seemed (Jer 1:8, 19); He was conscious of God's willingness to fight for him (Jer 20:11);

He held to the power of the divine word (Jer 1:9);

He loved the memories of Israel's covenant past (Jer 2:2-3).

Like Moses he was called to be God's mouth (Jer 15:19) yet he was afflicted with a sense of alienation from God (Jer14:8-9).

It was this sensitive and passionate man who was called to be a prophet to the nations (Jer 1:5), an intercessor for the people; a gleaner in the vineyard (Jer 6:9); a refiner and tester (Jer 6:27-30); a speaker of parables and a parable himself (Jer 13:1-11; 18:1-3; 19:1-2); a "fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls against the whole land" (Jer 1:18).

Jeremiah was not the only prophet of his day. Habakkuk and Zephaniah were contemporaries in Judah, and Ezekiel and Daniel were among those who worked in Babylon immediately after Jeremiah. But he stands out as a man who was isolated by a message from God that made him unpopular. His style is direct and powerful and it was he more than any other who gave expression to a piety, faith and hope, and indeed a theology, which made it possible for Judah to survive the disasters of the nation's fall, the destruction of the temple and the end of the dynasty established by King David 400 years earlier.

REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY

Read aloud, or if the group may be uncomfortable in doing a read reflection, then allow them time to sit and read slowly and quietly.

If you take the first option the reader should take care to read slowly leaving appropriate moments of silence where questions are asked. Listeners should sit quietly, hear the passage preferably with closed eyes. Watch the images your mind gives you as we talk about Jeremiah's call ...

If you choose with the second option, it might work best to give the group 10 minutes and invite each person to go and find a quiet space – perhaps in another room if space is available.

Jeremiah wants us to know right at the start of his account something very important. He wants us to know who he is ... he tells us who he is, by sharing with us, who God tells him he is – he is set apart, chosen, chosen from before he took his first gasping breath to be one of god’s messengers, one of God’s leaders.

Has it struck you, that what you offer to God in leadership, he planned for you to be able to give? You are here, you are offering yourself, you are placing yourself in the position of a leader, because God made you to do it ... perhaps you feel slightly anxious about it. Perhaps unworthy. Jeremiah did. He told God, ‘I’m too young, I can’t utter anything wise!’ perhaps you also have uttered something similar to God.

‘I’m don’t know enough ... I’m not righteous enough ... I’m not old enough ... I have too many questions ... I have no time, I have no influence, no-one listens to me ...

You are not alone. Jeremiah, and thousands upon thousands of the most effective kingdom builders have said the same things. God is gracious ... he gives Jeremiah visions, pictures in his mind and heart of what his leadership will be.

The almond tree, the first tree to blossom in spring, is a sign of the vindication of the divine word – God’s word will be followed swiftly by action; God always acts. And the picture of the scalding cauldron ... again a sign of the activity of a God who does not stand weakly by, but a God who intervenes and will ‘have his kingdom come.’

These words, and this call is not unusual in our Old Testament. Moses, Amos, Gideon, and Isaiah, all have similar experiences – A God who comes to them, calls them, the seeming enormity of the call almost frightening them ... for they all somehow object ... and then a reaffirmation of who God is.

God is, the I Am, the God who is with them in their call.

‘Don’t be afraid of anyone Jeremiah for I am with you.’ A comforting message, as the words that God would give Jeremiah would out him in constant conflict with the nation.

Don’t be scared? Why? Because God would be with him. As he was with Moses, Amos, Gideon and Isaiah ... and with every leader who has stepped out in their call.

After the visions, the command is repeated, ‘Don’t be afraid.’

Can you hear the same ageless God speak to you? Don’t be afraid?’

Can you trust the ancient of days ... who calls you ... equips you ... and offers you the assurance, that what you do for him, you do not do alone ...

Gently and in your own time, come back to us in our study of God’s word tonight ...

ACTIVITY:

1. Read Jeremiah 1 again and allow a significant period of silence to allow the words to work in you. In groups (or preferably pairs) reflect on at least one of the following:

- Look at the pattern of the call of Jeremiah and how it resonates with what you know about the call of Moses, Amos, Gideon, Ezekiel and Isaiah. What do verses 1-19 tell you about the nature of God’s call?

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- As you reflect on this chapter what are you learning about Jeremiah as a leader? What leadership qualities does he have?

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- With what did Jeremiah struggle?

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- Why are the visions important? What is the reason behind including the two visions?

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- What divine characteristics are revealed in this chapter?

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In plenary session share each groups insights into the above and record on a F/C.

2. As you look at the insights you have gleaned from your reflections on the passage, where is the challenge in this passage for you and for your church? Take time in silence to reflect individually (5 minutes) and then in small groups share the challenges. In plenary report the challenges and note on another large sheet of paper.

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3. What is God calling your church to do or to be in your community? (This can be local neighbourhood, town or city, nationally or internationally.) As an individual, what part is God calling you to play in this mission? What does he promise if you hear and respond to his call?

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4. It may not be easy to hear God's call, it will probably take us right out of our comfort zones. Consider how we, like God's early leaders may battle with uncomfortable emotions and try to make excuses. What do we learn from this passage?

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TAKE AWAY

End the session with a short act of worship where Psalm 139 is read and participants write on a piece of paper which is collected up in a basket one thing they plan to do for the mission of the church as a result of studying Jeremiah 1. Then go out and take steps to do the action you have committed yourself to.

Song: H& P 770 Go forth and tell.
 You are the potter, I am the clay
 Play on CD the song, 'The potters hands'

Suggested reading: Henri Nouwen " In the Name of Jesus" reflections on Christian Leadership