

St Barnabas Sunday 21st August 2022.
Timeless lessons about character. Jeremiah 38:1-13

A prophet in the Old Testament was someone who was used by God to communicate His message to the world. Prophets were also called “seers” because they could “see,” spiritually speaking, as God gave them insight (1 Sam. 9:9). The prophets can be divided into the “writing prophets” such as Isaiah, Daniel, Amos, and Malachi; and the “non-writing prophets” such as Elisha (1 Kings 19:16). They came from a variety of backgrounds, spoke to different audiences, possessed unique styles, and used assorted methods. They were usually men but the Old Testament also mentions prophetesses such as Miriam and Deborah. However, if you were living in OT times you would not wish God to call you to be a prophet. Why?

Hosea was told to marry Gomer, a prostitute (Hosea 1:2), who proved to be unfaithful but the marriage was arranged in order to use the prophet as a symbol of Israel's unfaithfulness to the Lord. His marriage dramatized the breakdown in the relationship between God and His people Israel.

God instructed **Isaiah** to walk about barefoot and naked for three years (Is. 20:1–4) to symbolize Assyria's upcoming domination of Egypt and Ethiopia. I couldn't walk barefoot in Ballasalla during the recent heatwave. So, how did Isaiah manage in the Holy Land?

And then there was **Jeremiah!** He ministered for 50 years under Judah's last five kings, the final one being king Zedekiah who had Jeremiah imprisoned and then thrown into a muddy cistern at the request of his officials (or princes.) They did not like Jeremiah's prediction of Judah's fall to Babylon and requested that Zedekiah have the prophet put to death. The king, who had previously sought Jeremiah's words from the Lord and yet failed to heed them, let the officials do as they pleased. Jeremiah was lowered into a deep well, known as a cistern, which “*had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud*” (Jer. 38:6). He would have died there, if not for the courage of another official, Ebed-Melech who appealed to the king for Jeremiah's release. The King commanded Ebed-Melech to take thirty men with him to rescue Jeremiah. Ebed-Melech did so and Jeremiah was taken out of the cistern but still remained in prison (Jer. 38:28). From this story we can learn timeless lessons about character from those involved: Jeremiah, king Zedekiah, the princes who demanded the prophet's death and, most significantly, the heroic actions of Ebed-Melech.

1. Obedience to God is essential even when it is difficult.

Jeremiah's entire life was about obedience to God. Though his message of repentance to Judah landed on deaf ears for decades, he did not give up. Even after being thrown into prison and then into the muddy cistern for prophesying the fall of Judah to Babylon, he still spoke God's truth. He was not successful in saving Judah but he did escape being killed by the Babylonians and ended up being treated with respect by them.

As believers, we are called to this same unwavering obedience to God no matter the circumstances. Jeremiah ministered during a time of false prophets who were respected because they preached only good news. This didn't keep Jeremiah from preaching the message of repentance God had given him. We should not aim to win a popularity contest. We are here to live by and speak of God's truth.

I have been involved in a number of funeral services recently and I find some of the "tripe" churned out to be offensive especially if we know the character of the deceased who never made a profession of faith and whose lifestyle was not honouring to God. Some comments I have heard are:

- Wonderful person, now having his drinking parties in heaven!
- He is up there now looking down on us and having a good time!

Let's be clear – the Bible says in John 3:3, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* However, at funeral services we need to be circumspect in what we say. We need to remember that Romans 14:12 and 1 Cor. 4:5 tell us we can't judge where anyone else stands before God, but that each of us will one day give an account of ourselves. We should love those who are grieving and pray for an opportunity to speak truth into their lives without condemnation or criticism. Thankfully it's not about performance, it's about relationship – the Lord is my Shepherd.

2. Cowardice leads to self-destruction

King Zedekiah was full of fear and he was a coward. He did not stand up to his own men who wanted to destroy the prophet and, under pressure, allowed Jeremiah to be thrown into the cistern. When Ebed-Melech's plea convinced him that Jeremiah should be released from the cistern, the king ordered 30 men to go with him to avoid any opposition. The lesson we learn from Zedekiah is this - giving in to peer pressure leads to injustice.

Today, individuals who are known as "whistle blowers", are sometimes maligned and this is unfair. Truth in business isn't of paramount importance and, at times, it is all about success and the promotion of self.

King Zedekiah's cowardice also showed up in his fear of ridicule. He would not heed Jeremiah's advice to flee to Babylon because he was afraid how the exiled Jews there would mock him. He failed to accept God's instruction and ironically ended up being ridiculed.

Today the individuals who suffer most in this regard are the youth who face peer pressure in school, being forced to follow the crowd and fit into their lifestyle. We all need to be loved, accepted and have the approval of others but giving in can be disastrous and have eternal consequences. We need to pray for our young people.

3. Pride comes before a fall

The king and the officials in his court didn't believe Jeremiah's warning about Babylon because it went against what they believed to be true. They didn't think Jerusalem could be conquered by Babylon and didn't want Jeremiah's words to discourage the people or the soldiers. Their own beliefs and desires blinded them to the truth.

Pride is one of the most difficult sins to see in ourselves. Admitting we are wrong and need to take a different course of action requires humility. God's word repeatedly warns about its dangers (Prov. 16:18, 1 John 2:16) because pride leads to self-destruction and keeps us from being led by the Holy Spirit.

We are all guilty of pride:

- Pride in our position or standing in life
- Assuming we already know something when someone is teaching
- Seeing ourselves as too good to perform certain tasks
- Being too proud to ask for help
- Talking about ourselves a lot
- Thinking we are better than others who are different or less fortunate
- Disregarding the advice of others
- Being constantly critical
- Justifying our actions through manipulation of Scripture
- Having consistent need for attention and affirmation
- Being unable to receive constructive criticism.

A hallmark of maturity is the ability to give and take constructive criticism without getting defensive or provoking defensiveness in others. Proverbs 9:8 and 17:10 commend people wise enough to profit from correction and Ephesians 4:15 reminds us to speak the truth in love. Unfortunately, what some people call "constructive criticism" isn't really all that constructive. When we react defensively to criticism, are we being overly

sensitive, or is our reaction a signal that we're being abused? When we deliver the criticism, are we speaking the truth in love or are we abusing others? The tongue is two edged and has the ability to wound deeply.

4. Justice requires courage

Ebed-Melech was a eunuch in charge of king Zedekiah's harem and was a dark skinned man from Ethiopia. His name means "king's slave" and when he heard of Jeremiah's plight he went to the king and pleaded to be allowed to rescue him. He was a foreigner risking his position by petitioning the king while he was holding court in a public place. Ebed-Melech not only saw the cruel injustice done to Jeremiah, but took heroic action to remedy the situation. The possible risk to his own life didn't stop him. He did not fear what the princes would say or do and ploughed ahead courageously. His petition to the king was earnest, simple and effective.

Sometimes we see injustice but are afraid to speak up either because no one else is or because we fear the repercussions to our own reputation, comfort or safety. When we see an injustice or disregard of God's Word in legislation or otherwise regarding abortion, euthanasia, the gay society or marriage between same gender couples, we would do well to be more like Ebed-Melech. He didn't let fear stop him from pursuing the rescue of Jeremiah but by taking a stand for what we believe as Christians is costly. However, Romans 12:2 says, *"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God."* God doesn't call us to be comfortable. He calls us to seek Him when we are put into uncomfortable situations and to trust Him to know that He will pull us through. Society doesn't care if we become more comfortable because that is acceptable and yet comfortable isn't where God works best.

5. God can use us no matter who or where we are, if we let Him.

Jeremiah was a Jewish prophet. The message God gave him to share was for the Jews to repent. Yet the man God used to save him was not a Jew but it would seem Jeremiah had at least made an impression on Ebed-melech. He believed in the God of the Jews, because Jeremiah gave him this message from God before the Babylonians broke down the walls of Jerusalem and set it on fire: *"But I will deliver you on that day, declares the LORD, and you shall not be given into the hand of the men of whom you are afraid. For I will surely save you, and you shall not fall by the sword, but you shall have your life as a prize of war, because you have put your trust in me, declares the LORD."* (Jer. 39:17-18).

Ebed-Melech followed the prompting of his heart and took courageous action. His part in this story reminds us that God can use anyone, even us, if we let Him.

Do you know what spiritual gift or gifts that God has given you? We each have at least one and if you don't know what it is...have you asked God? It is easier for others to see your gifting and if you are using your gift correctly you will not draw attention to it. By so doing you are giving the glory to the giver, the Holy Spirit, which is the right attitude.

6. Deeds of kindness should be performed in a kind manner.

Though Ebed-Melech was quick to take action in his appeal to the King, he was intentional and thoughtful in how he carried out the rescue of Jeremiah. He used rags as well as ropes, which would prevent the ropes from chafing under his arms and causing Jeremiah serious injury.

My son owns a greyhound dog. She has thin skin, so my son has to be careful when he takes her for walks as her skin could get easily damaged. That's love and consideration!

Jeremiah could have been saved without the rags, and yet he was saved so much more "comfortably" with them. If those around us are convinced that we love them they will be easy prey to our soul-winning efforts (Mark 10:21).

One other thing, Ebed-Melech was a foreigner from Ethiopia and yet he had a loving concern for someone from a different country who was hated by everybody.

Sometimes in our good intention to help others, we can increase the blessing by remaining anonymous if possible. At Capernwray Bible College I witnessed students, staff and guests having their financial needs being met with brown envelopes being placed in their pigeon holes. Such gifts from God brought blessing to the individuals involved. God knows the actions of our hearts which can show the one we are helping that we genuinely care about them. It demonstrates that we aren't performing a good deed because we want applause, but because of love. 1 Cor. 13:3 *"If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."*

Many of us have found ourselves in difficult situations this past year. We may have felt, at times, that we were in our own muddy pit. In those moments, we can despair, be fearful and give up or we can trust in God and choose to let the experience build our faith and character. The story of the muddy cistern shows us that those who follow God and act with courage and kindness will fare far better than those who are led by cowardice and pride. By following the examples of men like Jeremiah

and Ebed-Melech, we can remain faithful to God and help each other through hard times.

Do you know the outcome of this story?

- Jerusalem was captured and destroyed by the Babylonians.
- King Zedekiah tried to escape but was captured and brought before king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon who pronounced sentence on him. Zedekiah was forced to watch his sons and all the princes and nobles of Judah put to death. Then his eyes were put out, he was bound with bronze shackles and taken to Babylon as a slave.
- King Nebuchadnezzar gave instructions to release **Jeremiah** and not to harm him. He was to be looked after and given whatever he asked and returned to his home where he remained with his own people.
- **Ebed-Melech's** life was spared in accordance with the prophetic word given through Jeremiah (Jer.39:15-18). He was not harmed because he had put his trust in the Lord.

Timeless lessons about character!

God will not be mocked.

God is no man's debtor.

Jeremiah 38:1-13 Romans 12:1-8 John 3:1-21