**Jeremiah 8.20:**

**The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.**

As a boy I was fortunate enough to be able, by playing hookey, to go to our local Congregational Church to hear John Huxtable, later to become the first General Secretary of the United Reformed Church. One occasion has remained with me, not because of what he said, but because of the text:

> The harvest is over, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.

That was my introduction to Jeremiah and the beginning of a lifetimes' fascination. We too have had a long spring and summer, under the fear of Covid 19, a time of anxiety and worry, for ourselves, for loved ones, for our society, and indeed the world. Now we are in a second lock-down, and, despite glimmers of hope for a vaccine soon, the threat of a long haul to come. Spirits are low, even to despair and depression. Our communal life is in disarray and thousands face job losses and poverty; thousands mourn. 'The summer is ended and we are not saved'.

These words come in one of Jeremiah's laments, embedded among his prophetic oracles. More than any other prophet he shows us the inner workings of his spirit. He lived in perilous times, watching the growing power of Babylon as it surged destructively westwards, leading to the fall and demolition of Jerusalem, the end of the Davidic dream. But that was not all. From the north came the marauding, rampaging tribes of Scythians. Egypt, ever looking for a chance to expand, threatened from the south; then proved unreliable allies against the Babylonians. Meanwhile Jerusalem itself was riddled with division. Politicians were indecisive and corrupt. Supported by the economic and cultural establishment, they tried to maintain morale with bland assurances:

> They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
>
> Saying, 'Peace, Peace', where there is no peace. (6.14)

It was in these harrowing circumstances that Jeremiah carried his burden for his people. What did it all mean? Where was it all going? Above all, where was God in all this? No wonder Jeremiah wept.

> O that my head were a spring of water,
>
> And my eyes a fountain of tears,

So that I might weep day and night

For the slain of my poor people. (9.1)

No wonder he had visions of escaping it all, of finding a peaceful refuge, a cottage in the Welsh mountains or a bothy in the Highlands.

O that I had, in the desert,

A traveller's lodging place,

That I might leave my people,

And go away from them. (9.2)

Thus, shutting himself off from the turmoil around, hoping the it will all go away.

But Jeremiah did not escape. He chose to stay and share the anguish. As did Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when he refused the safety of an ex-pat pastorate in London to be with his people under the Nazi yoke. So, Jeremiah remained obedient to his call:

You shall go to all whom I send you,

And you shall speak whatever I command you.

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you. (Jere. 1.7-8)

Jeremiah becomes the voice of God in the hurly burly of Jerusalem. Thus, the tears of Jeremiah become the voice of God, of God weeping over Jerusalem; to be remembered generations later as Jesus approaches the Holy City.

As he came near and saw the city, Jesus wept over it, saying: 'If you, even you, had only recognised the things that make for peace'. (Lk.19.41)

They were, first of all, tears of despair and bitterness, even of anger; tears that can hardly be shed because of the grief of watching all that is precious disappearing; the emptiness and waste of it all.

But they were, also, tears of sympathy, of being alongside those who hurt. As Ezekiel, his contemporary in Babylon, was to put it: 'I came to the exiles [huddled in all their misery] and I sat there among them stunned, for seven days.' (3.15) 'You are not forgotten, for I am going nowhere, and we are in this

together.' As did Father Damien who ministered as a leper to his fellow sufferers.

I will weep when you are weeping;

When you laugh I'll laugh too;

I will share your joy and sorrow,

Till we've seen this journey through. (Richard Gillard)

They are, therefore, also the tears of burden. Jeremiah was called to enter into 'the hurt of his people', to struggle with the anger and despair, so that it scarred his own soul. These are tears of exhaustion and numbness; of bumping from one crisis and threat to another; yet not giving up. This is hard, almost impossible, to do. But, remember, this is what God does. There is a remarkable passage in Hosea. After lamenting over the apostacy of Israel, their abandoning God, God says, through the prophet,

How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?

…… For I am God and no mortal,

The Holy One in the midst. (11. 8,9)

In the midst of all the madness, God is present in sorrow, alongside us in our weakness and fear, sharing it so that it becomes his sadness too. This is not easy to realise. Whether we are thrust into the struggle or simply watch and hope, accept that, even if invisible, 'underneath are the everlasting arms'. (Deut. 33.27)

They are also the tears of judgement, of disappointment and sadness. This, perhaps, may be a difficult idea, the idea of judgement. But, if only we would, or could, as God has called us, live in peace, justice and service, with each other and the natural world, then the darkness would not be so fearful. We bring judgement on ourselves. But the judgement of God both shines a light on the reality of our situation in all its brokenness and also opens up the possibility of a new and gracious way. For the justice of God is to be

found in Jesus, who longs to gather us in, who wills to restore us, looking for the wavering possibility of a change of heart.

This means that these are also the tears of hope. The destruction of Jerusalem is not the last word. Jeremiah was also the prophet of hope. Two incidents illustrate this. In the middle of the final siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah was asked to act on behalf of his family in a legal affair, back in his home village of Anathoth. He accepts, despite its seeming futility, and purchases the field, and seals the deeds, to be opened when, if ever, some sense of normality is restored. Previously, after the first deportation to Babylon, he wrote a letter to the exiles (29), telling them to settle down and build a new life, to await developments. The time of bitterness is not the end. The old ways have been destroyed; but there is a future. What it is may not be clear. Certainly, it will not be a return to the 'old' normal. There will be a 'new' normal, that grows out of and yet moves on from the old. The People of God can and will discover afresh the strength and reality of faith and rejoice again in God's presence. And so it happened! The Temple was indeed rebuilt (only to be destroyed again); but an independent state (except for a few war-torn years) never restored. Instead a new pattern, Judaism, emerged – the Diaspora or dispersion of Jewish communities across the world, centred on Synagogue and the reading of the sacred scrolls. Out of the ashes arose a new beginning.

We, too, live in difficult and even perilous times. There is a sea change in our nation and in our world that makes the future uncertain and even threatening. We live in a nation divided, notably by Brexit and its unknown consequences; a world increasingly dominated by corporate capitalism and divided by political populism and tribalism; where the rich get richer and the poor ever more marginalised; where social media facilitate a radical individualism and are abused; where reason is called opinion and opinion called truth. Above all there is the ever-looming reality of the rapid degradation of the planet through human activity, through climate change, pollution, species loss and the constant impoverishment of the environment. There have, of course, been such turning points before; but none, perhaps, so fraught. W. B. Yeats caught the feeling of such times when, during the Spanish flu epidemic, he watched his dying wife.

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
>
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity. (*The Second Coming*)

We do, indeed, live in difficult, even perilous times. The' valley of the shadow of death' (Psalm 23.4) is real, dark and threatening. Whether we want it or not our road passes through it. It is not wrong to be anxious and fearful. It is not wrong to weep and to long for daylight. Even if it is difficult to accept, there is 'balm in Gilead' (Jere. 8.22), a presence on which to throw oneself. Perhaps we can end with some words of Dag Hammarskjold, one-time General Secretary of the United Nations:

Night is drawing nigh –

For all that has been – Thanks!

To all that shall be – Yes! (Markings, 87)