

# OpenTheo

## January 6th: Jeremiah 5 & John 2:1-12

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Can one righteous man be found? Changing water into wine.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## **Transcript**

Jeremiah, chapter 5. Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem. Look and take note. Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth, that I may pardon her.

Though they say, As the Lord lives, yet they swear falsely. O Lord, do not your eyes look for truth? You have struck them down, for they felt no anguish. You have consumed them, but they refuse to take correction.

They have made their faces harder than rock. They have refused to repent. Then I said, These are only the poor.

They have no sense, for they do not know the way of the Lord, the justice of their God. I will go to the great, and will speak to them, for they know the way of the Lord, the justice of their God. But they all alike had broken the yoke, they had burst the bonds.

Therefore a lion from the forest shall strike them down, a wolf from the desert shall devastate them, a leopard is watching their cities. Everyone who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces, because their transgressions are many, their apostasies are great. How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me, and have sworn by those who are no gods.

When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery, and trooped to the houses of whores. They were well-fed, lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbour's wife. Shall I not punish them for these things? declares the Lord.

And shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this? Go up through her vine rows and destroy, but make not a full end. Strip away her branches, for they are not the Lord's. For the house of Israel and the house of Judah have been utterly treacherous to me, declares the Lord.

They have spoken falsely of the Lord, and have said, He will do nothing. No disaster will come upon us, nor shall we see sword or famine. The prophets will become wind.

The word is not in them, thus shall it be done to them. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, Because you have spoken this word, behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people would, and the fire shall consume them. Behold, I am bringing against you a nation from afar, O house of Israel, declares the Lord.

It is an enduring nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose language you do not know, nor can you understand what they say. Their quiver is like an open tomb, they are all mighty warriors. They shall eat up your harvest and your food.

They shall eat up your sons and your daughters. They shall eat up your flocks and your herds. They shall eat up your vines and your fig trees.

Your fortified cities in which you trust, they shall beat down with the sword. But even in those days, declares the Lord, I will not make a full end of you. And when your people say, Why has the Lord our God done all these things to us? You shall say to them, As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve foreigners in a land that is not yours.

Declare this in the house of Jacob, proclaim it in Judah. Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but see not, who have ears but hear not. Do you not fear me? declares the Lord.

Do you not tremble before me? I place the sand as a boundary for the sea, a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass. Though the waves toss, they cannot prevail. Though they roar, they cannot pass over it.

But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart. They have turned aside and gone

away. They do not say in their hearts, Let us fear the Lord, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest.

Your iniquities have turned these away, and your sins have kept good from you. For wicked men are found among my people. They lurk like fowlers lying in wait.

They set a trap. They catch men. Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of deceit.

Therefore they have become great and rich. They have grown fat and sleek. They know no bounds in deeds of evil.

They judge not with justice the cause of the fatherless to make it prosper. And they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things? declares the Lord.

And shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this? An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land. The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction. My people love to have it so.

But what will you do when the end comes? Jeremiah chapter 5 continues the condemnation of the nation of Judah. The chapter opens with a pervasive indictment of the society of Jerusalem. The rot extends throughout the entire social body.

The opening eight verses are structured as a five stanza piece of poetry with alternating speeches. The Lord addresses the search party sent throughout the city in verses 1 and 2. Jeremiah addresses the Lord in verse 3. Jeremiah speaks to himself in verses 4 and 5 and to the Lord from the end of verse 5 to verse 6. In the final stanza the Lord speaks to the people. The chapter opens with an imagined task given to a search party to scour the city of Jerusalem for one faithful man on account of whom the city might be spared.

There is clearly some allusion here to Abraham's conversation with the Lord in Genesis chapter 18 concerning the fate of Sodom. Whereas Sodom might have been saved for the sake of ten righteous, Jerusalem receives far more favourable terms. One man would be enough.

The Lord is looking for justice and fidelity. However, when the city is inspected, not even one such person can be discovered. Jeremiah observes the insensibility of the people to the judgment of the Lord and their failure to respond to his correction.

Yet this insensibility, Jeremiah reasons, is among the poor of the land, people unschooled in the law and in its demands. Surely such dullness and resistance is to be expected to some extent among the uneducated of the people. Things will be much better among the cultured elite of the land.

They are not ignorant of the law. They have received instruction in it. But the condition among the great of the land was, if anything worse, the people who knew the law had willfully rejected it.

When the Lord had delivered his people from slavery, he had placed them as if they were his trained and faithful oxen under the yoke of the law. However, Israel had broken the yoke and run wild. Now the runaway ox finds itself among the wild beasts.

Rejecting the guidance and oversight of the Lord, it placed itself in the reach of the predators. A lion from the forest, a wolf from the wild lands or a crouching leopard will come upon them and tear them apart. Having undertaken this failed inspection, the Lord poses the devastating question to the city.

How can I pardon you? When the city was given the opportunity to make a case for its sparing, it could not make one. It is now struck dumb before the Lord. The rebellion of the nation is described.

They have abandoned the Lord and they have sworn by idols. Even when enjoying the Lord's bounty they flagrantly violated the seventh commandment, trooping to whorehouses. The affinity between the seventh commandment concerning adultery and the first and second commandments concerning idolatry and rejection of the Lord should be recognised here.

The jealousy of the Lord for the heart of his people is connected to his upholding of marriage more generally. Once again Jerusalem is compared to an animal, albeit this time to a well endowed stallion desiring to copulate with no self control. The question that all of this leads to in verse 9 intensifies the question of verse 7. How can I pardon you? becomes Shall I not punish them? For the Lord not to punish such a city would seem to be a dereliction of his justice.

It would be a winking at the gravest infidelity. Everything about Judah's conduct calls out for judgement without sparing and in verse 10 the Lord sends out a new party as it were, this time to search and destroy. The vine rows of a terraced vineyard correspond here to the streets of the first verse.

Israel is the vineyard of the Lord's planting but now all of its branches must be stripped away. However, in the face of all of the reasons to place Judah under the most devastating and complete of judgements, the Lord draws back. The party must not make a full end, even in the face of Judah's utter treachery.

There is no reason for the mitigation of the city's judgement here. The earlier search party investigated closely and found no one. The only reason why the Lord would refrain from bringing a devastating and final end is his own sheer mercy.

The people have scorned the prospect of the Lord's judgement. The prophets have

denied it, yet it will most certainly befall them. Because the people have spoken falsely about the Lord, prophesying the empty claims that his judgement will not be forthcoming, the Lord will place his words in the mouth of Jeremiah his messenger, making those words like fire and the people like kindling.

Here we should recall Jeremiah 1.9-10 Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

The words of the false prophet who declared peace are hot air, but the word of the Lord in the mouth of Jeremiah is like fire. A connection between fire and the mouth of the prophet can be seen on various occasions in scripture. Isaiah's lips were touched by a burning coal by the Lord.

Tongues of flame rested upon the heads of the disciples on the day of Pentecost, igniting their tongues by the spirit manifested in their speaking of different languages. In Revelation 11.5, fire proceeds from the mouth of the two witnesses and consumes their enemies. Jeremiah's word will not prove vain.

The judgement that he declares will come to pass. The Lord describes the enemy that he is bringing upon Judah, a powerful and ancient nation, a people with a strange language, mighty in battle. They will consume Judah's produce, they will consume Judah's young people, they will consume their flocks and their herds.

And the fortified cities in which Judah placed its confidence will be obliterated by this invading force. Yet even when this judgement falls, it will be tempered by the mercy of the Lord, which will save the people from suffering their final end. There is a poetic justice to the Lord's judgement.

His people have forsaken him and served foreign gods in their land, so he will forsake them to serve foreigners in a land not their own. If they are so eager to serve the foreign gods, he will give them their fill of it. In Psalm 115 verses 4-8, the psalmist declares of the pagan nations, Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.

They have mouths, but do not speak, eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear, noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel, feet, but do not walk.

And they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them. So do all who trust in them.

Judah seems to have suffered this fate. They have become as insensible as the idols that they worship. They have eyes, but cannot see, ears, but cannot hear.

This is a common description of the people of God, grown hard-hearted, stiff-necked, and

dulled in their senses as a result of their sin. The Lord is the creator of the whole earth, the master of its greatest forces, yet they do not fear him. They are utterly dependent upon his provision for the rains and the harvest, which have been withheld from them on account of their sins.

Yet still they brazenly continue in their rebellion, acting as if they were beyond the reach of their maker. They have committed themselves to the way of practical atheism, behaving as if there were no just or powerful God to judge them. The concluding verses of the chapter present a searing indictment upon the predatory and cruel elite of the land, profiteering off their mistreatment of others, failing to bring justice to the needy and the oppressed, to the widow and the fatherless.

The society is a rotten one, one in which the evil prosper, and the poor are downtrodden. The corruption is pervasive. The prophets prophesy obliging lies that serve to bolster the injustice, while the priests, who should be upholding the law of the Lord, are legitimating the oppressors instead.

And it isn't as if this stopped with the injustice of those in authority. The people themselves are utterly complacent and consenting towards such injustice, happily tolerating it. These aren't the actions of a hated tyranny, but of a nation where injustice, oppression and predation meet with widespread popular support, because life is easier that way.

A society where the poor are not protected may be a society where goods are cheaper, or where it is easier to get one's way through bribery, corruption and mistreatment of the vulnerable. A society that has little regard for, or protections for, the weak greatly advantages the strong, who don't need to provide for or intervene on behalf of others. Bringing justice to such a society would make a lot of people's lives less convenient.

It's just not expedient. However, the Lord is the one who is the protector of the poor, the widow and the fatherless, who are promised justice when they cry to him. A nation like Judah cannot hope to escape his judgement.

A question to consider. How does Jeremiah chapter 5 continue some of the underlying metaphors of the preceding chapters? John chapter 2 verses 1-12 Jesus said to the servants, Fill the jars with water. And they filled them up to the brim.

And he said to them, Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast. So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew, the master of the feast called the brigarum and said to him, Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine.

But you have kept the good wine until now. This the first of his signs Jesus did at Cana in

Galilee, and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there a few days.

Jesus turning of the water into wine in John chapter 2 is the first of his signs within the gospel. John chapter 2 begins with a reference to the third day. If we go back through chapter 1 we can recognise that this is either the 7th or the 8th day of a sequence of days.

Perhaps there is a subtle hint here of resurrection themes in the reference to three days and the situation of the third day on the 8th day of another sequence. The signs of John's gospel serve a particular theological purpose, and the literary structure of the gospel is designed to showcase this. The first half of the book after the opening prologue is often termed the book of signs, which leads on to the book of glory in the second half, after which there is a concluding epilogue of the book in chapter 21.

John numbers the first two signs, and by certain enumerations there are seven signs within the book of signs. There is the changing of the water into wine, the healing of the official son in chapter 4, the healing of the paralytic in chapter 5, the multiplying of the loaves in chapter 6, walking on the water in chapter 6, healing of the blind man in chapter 9, and the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11. As signs, these events point beyond themselves.

They are indications of the greater mission that Christ is performing. Seven signs would suggest that Christ is in the business of a new creation. The seven signs might also have some structure within themselves.

It is possible that there is a two-panel structure. Signs 1 to 3 correspond with signs 4 to 6, and then sign 7, the raising of Lazarus, is the climactic sign. Water to wine, then, would correspond with the multiplication of the loaves.

Christ is providing both wine and bread. The healing of the official son corresponds with the walking on the water, and the extensive parallels between chapters 5 and 9 help us to connect the healing of the paralytic with the healing of the blind man. This sign is the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

It also seems to involve a change in his relationship with his mother. In John's gospel, Mary is never referred to by name. She is always Jesus' mother or addressed as woman.

Of course, it would be strange indeed if Mary's name was unknown to the readers of the gospel. Presumably, they are quite aware of Mary's name. In another very significant episode within the book, which should be related to this, the beloved disciple takes Mary into his own home.

So the omission of her name here seems to be significant. She stands for something

greater than just an individual. Jesus' answer to his mother's request is a distancing one.

Woman, what is there between us? My hour has not yet come. This might imply a number of things. Mary must relate to Jesus more as disciple than as mother from this point onwards.

More significantly, Mary does not realise the weight of her request. By prompting Jesus' first sign, her request precipitates his entry onto the path that leads him to the cross. And very significantly, he accepts it.

Later, at the beginning of chapter 7, Jesus also responds to a request from his family, in a way that discourages them, declaring that his time has not yet come, but then goes along with what they have requested secretly. By the end of this episode, Mary's position will have changed. No longer will she be standing over against Jesus and the disciples as Jesus' natural mother.

By the end, she will be grouped with Jesus' disciples as one of them. As Jesus embarks upon his ministry, it is as if she has to give up her old relationship with him and to take up a new one. Themes of water and purification are also very important throughout John's Gospel.

We see this in John's baptism in chapter 1, in Jesus' reference to people being born of water and the spirit in chapter 3, the reference to living water in chapter 4, and to Jesus and John's baptisms in chapter 3 and 4. There is the man waiting for the disturbance of the water by the sheep pool in chapter 5. There is the crossing of the sea of Tiberias in chapter 6. Jesus speaks about living water coming out of the heart of the one who believes. In chapter 9, the man is sent to the pool of Siloam. On the cross, when pierced, water flows out with blood from Jesus' side.

The final chapter contains allusions to Ezekiel chapter 47 and the flowing out of water from the temple. Here, the water of purification is in old water pots and these are transformed into something new, into wine. What was once merely water for cleansing now becomes wine for a feast, for celebrating a wedding.

The fact that Jesus turns water into wine as the first sign of his ministry might draw our mind back to another initial sign, the turning of the water of the Nile into blood. In both cases, the water is turned into something else that is red. But there is a clear contrast.

The changing of the water into blood made it undrinkable, whereas Jesus' changing of the water into wine makes it drinkable and delightful. It's a more glorious form of drink, a drink for celebration rather than for judgment. Jesus has already been identified as the Lamb of God, presumably as the Passover Lamb, and now the scene is set for a new exodus.

But here we see that even in the parallels between the two, there are contrasts. Where



Moses brought blood, Jesus brings wine. Jesus' sign heralds a glorious new creation as a place of wine and feasting and celebration.

We can think back to Isaiah chapter 25 and his description of a great feast of wine. The setting of the wedding feast is also significant. That a wedding feast is where this all begins introduces many of the themes of John's Gospel, in which Jesus as the bridegroom will be foregrounded.

John is the friend of the bridegroom. Jesus meets with the woman at the well, like the patriarchs met their wives at wells. We can think of later on Jesus' encounter with Mary Magdalene in the garden, reminiscent of Adam and Eve.

Jesus' feet are anointed in Bethany in a way that alludes back to Song of Songs chapter 1 verse 10. Buried in the garden tomb, there are again allusions back to the Song of Songs. The water of the Old Covenant is transformed into the wine of the New, and in the wedding feast of God's kingdom, the best comes later.

While people might be inclined to look back and see the greatest days of God's people lying in the past, as Jesus brings the wine of the kingdom, we know that the best is yet to come. Like a number of Jesus' signs, the miracle is performed through Jesus' word and by the response of people who believe it. The sign itself is performed in the hands of the servants, as the multiplication of the loaves will occur in the hands of the disciples.

In both cases, as people believe and obey Christ, the miraculous power of the kingdom will be manifested. Like the power of the kingdom more generally, this is done in secret. Only those who trust and obey Christ see what is taking place.

To others, it is a mystery. And yet the conversation between the Master of the Feast and the Bridegroom gives some indication of the sign character of what is taking place here. In the Master of the Feast's comments concerning the quality of the wine that Jesus has produced, we see an indication of the power of the kingdom relative to the purifying waters of the Old.

A question to consider, how did this sign manifest Jesus' glory as it says in verse 11?