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Judah's heart problem. We have the mind of Christ.

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

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 17. The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars. While their children remember their altars and their asherim, beside every green tree, and on the high hills, on the mountains in the open country.

Your wealth and all your treasures I will give for spoil as the price of your high places for sin throughout all your territory. You shall loosen your hand from your heritage that I gave to you, and I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that shall burn forever. Thus says the Lord, Cursed is the man who trusts in man, who makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord.

He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who

trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.

He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick. Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart, and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.

Like the partridge that gathers a brood, that she did not hatch, so is he who gets riches, but not by justice. In the midst of his days they will leave him, and at his end he will be a fool. A glorious throne set on high from the beginning, is the place of our sanctuary.

O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame. Those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water. Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed.

Save me, and I shall be saved. For you are my praise. Behold, they say to me, where is the word of the Lord? Let it come.

I have not run away from being your shepherd, nor have I desired the day of sickness. You know what came out of my lips, it was before your face. Be not a terror to me, you are my refuge in the day of disaster.

Let those be put to shame who persecute me, but let me not be put to shame. Let them be dismayed, but let me not be dismayed. Bring upon them the day of disaster.

Destroy them with double destruction. Thus said the Lord to me, go and stand in the people's gate, by which the kings of Judah enter, and by which they go out, and in all the gates of Jerusalem, and say, hear the word of the Lord, you kings of Judah, and all Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem who enter by these gates. Thus says the Lord, take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day, or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem.

And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the Sabbath, or do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your fathers. Yet they did not listen or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck, that they might not hear and receive instruction. But if you listen to me, declares the Lord, and bring in no burden by the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but keep the Sabbath day holy, and do no work on it, then there shall enter by the gates of this city kings and princes, who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their officials, the men of Judah, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

And this city shall be inhabited forever. And people shall come from the cities of Judah, and the places around Jerusalem, from the land of Benjamin, from the Shefala, from the hill country, and from the Negev, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings

and frankincense, and bringing thank offerings to the house of the Lord. But if you do not listen to me, to keep the Sabbath day holy, and not to bear a burden and enter by the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and shall not be quenched.

Jeremiah chapter 17 begins with another indictment of rebellious Judah. The law of God was supposed to be placed upon the heart, and later in chapter 31, verses 31 to 34, it will be written in the heart by the Spirit. The heart is supposed to be analogous to the Ark of the Covenant, the inner secret place where the Lord's throne is found, and where His law is treasured.

Yet on Judah's heart, and on the horns of Judah's altars, its sin is written instead. It has been engraved with a diamond-tipped iron stylus. The altar was a place where things were presented to the Lord, and the horns of the altar were places for atoning blood.

The heart is the core of the human person, where their deepest commitments, loyalties, and loves can be found. Judah's heart, however, is a sort of inversion of the law. It's a deep engraving of sin, and the horns of Judah's altars, that should bear the atoning blood that leads the Lord to forgive their sin, now bear indelible testimony to their iniquity, calling not for forgiveness, but for judgment.

Children were a further repository of memory, as the people taught their offspring the law and God's great deeds. But the children have been taught the ways of the idols, rather than those of the Lord. As a consequence of Judah's idolatry, their wealth and their treasures will be given to their enemies as spoil, and they will lose their possession of the land that they have defiled.

The disaster that will befall them is a direct consequence of their persistence in sin. Verse 5 takes the form of one of the curses of Deuteronomy chapter 27 to 28. A curse is declared upon the man who trusts in man's own strength and the strength of flesh.

This might anticipate some of Paul's distinctions between flesh and spirit. Flesh is a site of wrongful human confidence. The true confidence of the people of God must be in the Lord.

In verses 6 to 8, we have a comparison between human beings and trees. Human beings more generally are like trees. They draw nutrients from their surroundings.

They need to be planted in good locations if they are to thrive. However, if they're well planted, they can thrive, become strong, endure trials, and provide security and resources to others. The contrast here is between a desert shrub that lacks the conditions to thrive, and a tree that's planted beside waters.

Behind this, we might hear the words of Psalm 1 verses 1 to 3. Psalm 1 goes on to draw a contrast between the righteous and the wicked. But the wicked there are compared

not to desert shrubs, but to chaff. In the contrast here in Jeremiah, perhaps the greatest feature that stands out of the righteous person is his preparedness for the difficult times, for when the heat comes, or in the year of drought.

It is in the time of testing that the true character of a person is revealed. The hidden network of roots by which the tree drinks in water and brings up nutrients provides the strength and the stability that is displayed when the tree can withstand the fastest winds or the harshest conditions. Once again in verse 9, the dysfunctional heart is seen to be the root of humanity's problems more generally, and of Judah's in particular.

The heart is ill and it's deceitful. At the core of the human being is the sickness of sin, disease desires, cancerous attachments, core problems of which wicked deeds are the evidencing symptoms. Besides its illness, the heart is also mysterious and duplicitous.

Its ways are difficult to discern. We can't figure it out or master it. Jeremiah might also be speaking about his own heart here, along with the situation of the heart of Judah.

God, however, understands the human heart. He searches it out and tests it. He reveals its true character.

He is also the one who will judge the hearts and minds of all according to their works. We should entrust ourselves to God as he can understand us. He can discern who we truly are and we should beware of resting too much upon our own judgments concerning our hearts.

Rather, we should take our bearings from God's own guidance. The psalmist presents this truth in Psalm 139 verses 23 to 24 without the same despairing tone of the prophet here. And know my heart, try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Also in 1 John chapter 3 verses 19 to 20, by this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him. For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart and he knows everything. Verse 11 is a wisdom saying, perhaps a traditional proverb.

A number of possible suggestions have been put forward for what is meant here. Maybe the partridge steals young from other birds, or maybe it hatches birds that it hasn't laid. If this were the case, it might be a reference to the male partridge.

Others have suggested the possibility that it fails to hatch the eggs that it has. The proverb likely draws upon ancient understandings of the behaviour of partridges, some of it possibly misguided. The point of Jeremiah is not to comment upon the behaviour of partridges, but to use the analogy of the partridge to speak about some of the sins of Judah.

Perhaps the point is that just like the bird that has chicks not its own, the man who has riches gained by dishonesty will find that those riches abandon him in time. Riches apart from wisdom and integrity are short-lasting. The point here then might be similar to one that we encounter in the book of Proverbs, in Proverbs chapter 21 verses 5 to 7 for instance.

The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty. The getting of treasures by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapour and a snare of death. The violence of the wicked will sweep them away because they refuse to do what is just.

Whether for nations or for individuals, the true character of people will ultimately be revealed. One cannot indefinitely avoid the consequences of your action and the exposure of your true character. In verses 12 to 18, or perhaps only 13 to 18, we have another one of the confessions of Jeremiah.

He addresses the throne of God, the Lord's throne in heaven. Even in Jerusalem's distress, Jeremiah can turn to this higher throne. The Lord is the one in whom the true people of God place their hope and the one by whom their future is secured.

Those who reject him will be ashamed and dismayed. Written in the earth here likely contrasts with expressions like written in the book of life. It might also refer simply to death.

The dismay that they suffer is a result of their forsaking of the source of life. The Lord is the fountain of living water. Jeremiah calls out to the Lord for his effective healing and salvation.

He's being mocked and dismissed by the people around him, yet he's been faithful in his charge. He calls the Lord to bear witness to his integrity in performing his prophetic calling, praying that in the day of judgment, he will be vindicated and that those who persecute and dismiss him will be put to shame. The chapter ends on another surprising note as Jeremiah is instructed to stand in the gates and speak to people as they enter the city.

In particular, he's supposed to speak to them concerning their Sabbath breaking. The Sabbath was the great sign of the covenant given at Sinai. It was a chief sign marking Israel out as a people who had been released from slavery, from the cruelty of their labors, been given rest and who had been called to give rest and liberty to others.

Carrying on business as usual on the Sabbath day in Jerusalem was a failure to honor the covenant sign that the Lord had given at Sinai. Along with the commandment to honor father and mother, the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy was one of only two positive commandments situated at the very heart of the ten words. Repeatedly in the

book of Jeremiah, Judah's sin is identified as flowing in large part from a failure of memory.

Judah's failure to remember the Sabbath, to set apart this one day as holy, led to wide ranging failures in their understanding of the covenant and of their understanding of the creator God's sovereignty over their time. The people of Judah are presented by Jeremiah with a great promise. Nehemiah, in a post-exilic context, shows the same concern for the observance of the Sabbath day in Jerusalem and the same struggle with people who are failing to do so.

This is particularly clear in Nehemiah chapter 13. We should also recall the curse of the covenant in Leviticus chapter 26 verses 33-35 here. Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths, as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemy's land.

Then the land shall rest and enjoy its Sabbaths, as long as it lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest that it did not have on your Sabbaths when you were dwelling in it. A question to consider, where else in scripture can we find parallels to Jeremiah's discussion of the sickness and the duplicity of the heart? 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 26 to chapter 2 verse 16 And I, when I came to you brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him. These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.

For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all

things, but is himself to be judged by no one.

For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ. At the end of the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul wants the Corinthians to look at themselves and to consider the demographics of their group. They are not, for the most part, wise, powerful, influential, and of noble birth.

There are a few exceptions. Erastus, mentioned in Romans 16, verse 23, was the city treasurer, and Gaius, who hosted Paul and the entire church, was presumably a wealthy and influential man. However, for the most part, the Corinthians would be of little account in the eyes of their society, and yet they have been called by God.

The very choice of God revealed as they look around them at their fellow Corinthian Christians should challenge their concern for pursuing social status and honour. This choice was not accidental on God's part, but entirely purposeful. God chose the foolish things to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong, and the low and the despised to bring to nothing the things that are.

The result of all of this is that no one can boast in their strength, wisdom, or social status. If they have these things, God has, if anything, chosen them despite them, rather than on account of them. There was nothing in us, or the Corinthians, that merited God's choice.

God's choice was entirely unconditional and gracious, and it is because of God's gracious choice that we are in Christ, in whom we have graciously received a new standing. If the Corinthians wanted to look for a cause in themselves for God's choice of them, they would search in vain. However, having been chosen by God, we are in Christ Jesus.

We now belong to him, we participate in his status, and enjoy his riches. We had no wisdom to commend us. In Christ, we have wisdom from God.

We were weak, lacking in social power and influence. In Christ, we have the standing of righteousness before God, of right standing before the Father. We were despised.

In Christ, we have sanctification. We're set apart as holy people to the Lord. We were nothing.

In Christ, we have redemption. We're bought at the costliest of prices, marked out as precious in God's sight. We now have a standing and a status to rejoice in, but no boast to make in ourselves.

The point of all of this is that, when we do boast, we must boast in God alone. Paul quotes Jeremiah 9, verses 23-24, which clearly underlies the entirety of his argument here. There is a carnival-esque character to the Kingdom of God.

The typical ways of the world are suspended and overturned. Yet while a carnival is merely a temporary suspension or inversion of the social structure, a short relief from its crushing burden, or an escape valve for its pent-up energies, the Church testifies to an ultimate order that exceeds the structures of this present age. An order in which no one can boast or exalt himself over others, where the proud of this age are humbled and the poor are exalted.

Such a vision is one of the greatest treasures of the Christian Church. When the theological foundation of this vision of equality is abandoned, its remarkable social vision starts to crumble and it cannot be easily recovered. It doesn't deny the great differences between people or pretend that they don't exist.

It doesn't reduce people to sameness. However, it declares a more ultimate reality that places all such differences in a completely different value system. It levels the ground beneath our feet and makes possible radical transformations in the ways that we imagine and live in society.

The Epistle of James also raises some of these issues. James 1, verses 9-11 Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass, its flower fails and its beauty perishes.

So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. And then in James 2, verses 5-7 Listen, my beloved brothers, Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honourable name by which you were called? Like Paul, James challenges the value system by which many Christians still carefully seek the approval of the rich and honourable of this age, while dishonouring those who have been honoured by God.

Paul looks back to his first visit to the Corinthians. In his presentation of the Gospel to them, he manifested something of the character of the Gospel by virtue of the absence of showy rhetoric and clever philosophical displays. His message focused upon and foregrounded the cross, the reality at the very heart of the Gospel, the reality that punctures and overturns all proud human value systems.

His own presence among them was marked by weakness, by fear and trembling. Paul wasn't a stirring, charismatic and puffed-up orator with words full of pride and bravado. Rather, he seemed to cut a somewhat weak and unexceptional figure.

His message wasn't filled with clever philosophy, but proclaimed the cross plainly and simply, attended by signs of the Spirit's power. By his own account, Paul was no great speaker. In 2 Corinthians 11, verse 6, he admits that he is unskilled in speaking.

In 2 Corinthians 10, verse 10, for they say his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account. Christ's strength manifest in weakness is a recurring theme in Paul, most notably in 2 Corinthians 12, verses 9-10. Paul's concern here is that his philosophical acumen or eloquence never obscure or undermine the content of his message, which is about the power of God, which overturns all of the value systems of this age.

Paul isn't building a movement behind himself, the great teacher, orator and thinker, but he's bringing people to Christ and his cross. The contrast between human wisdom and divine wisdom, however, does not mean that divine wisdom is simply defined by its negation of the value structures of human wisdom and power. There is a wisdom appropriate to the Gospel.

Paul has already argued that we have a wisdom given to us in Christ. And here he elaborates, this wisdom has been hidden since before the ages. It isn't a wisdom of this age, nor can it be understood by the rulers of this age.

This wisdom was hidden before all ages, but also destined before all ages for our glory. It is a glorious and a magnificent wisdom, a kingly wisdom, beyond the understanding of the supposedly glorious rulers of this age, who were brought to nothing by it. Had they understood it, they would not have crucified Christ.

And Paul brings together some echoes from Isaiah to underline his point. Isaiah chapter 64, verse 4. From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him. And in Isaiah chapter 52, verse 15.

This wisdom is known and given through the Spirit. Without the Spirit, there would be no way of knowing it, for it is spiritually perceived. Yet the Spirit knows the things of God and can communicate them to his people.

Through the Spirit, we can see that God doesn't just bring to nothing the pretensions of human wisdom, but he outmatches them with a higher wisdom. And it is Paul's task to communicate this wisdom in a manner fitting to its content and its character. The Spirit of God is at odds with the Spirit of this world, which puts its trust and boast in human power and wisdom, all of which have been brought low by God.

This is why Paul is so concerned about the downplaying of the cross, for the trappings of human wisdom, eloquence, influence and standing. The cross is the point where the wisdom of God is most clearly seen over against the wisdom of the world. Yet those who are so concerned with the way that they appear to the rich, the wise, the powerful and the influential of this age, will always feel the greatest embarrassment about the cross and seek to avoid that point.

The spiritual person, the person who has received the Spirit of God, is able to discern things that the natural person, the person who lacks the Spirit, cannot. The person who truly operates by the Spirit of God can judge all things, but cannot be judged by others. Paul concludes the chapter by quoting a version of Isaiah 40, verse 13, who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, what man shows him his counsel.

But he makes a crucial shift in his final statement. We have the mind of Christ. Christ here is substituted for Lord, and the mind that he speaks of is clearly connected to the Spirit.

Mind here, as in Philippians 2, means mindset or way of thinking. In Christ we have a wisdom, a way of thinking, that is given through the Spirit and which is God's very own. Philippians chapter 2, verses 1 to 8 describes this.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord, and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. As in Philippians 2, Paul's point here is that the mind of Christ is the mindset seen in Christ going to the cross, and any approach that would downplay the cross and the way that it overturns the values of the world is not the Christian gospel. A question to consider.

How do you think Paul might have responded to Christians claiming some special spiritual status that exalted them above others, and some gnostic revelation that was exclusive to them? How does his own position not fall prey to this?