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Jeremiah forbidden to take a wife. The foolishness of God versus the wisdom of men.

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

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 16. The word of the Lord came to me, You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place. For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and daughters who are born in this place, and concerning the mothers who bore them, and the fathers who fathered them in this land, They shall die of deadly diseases.

They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried. They shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth.

For thus says the Lord, Do not enter the house of mourning, or go to lament or grieve for them, for I have taken away my peace from this people, my steadfast love and mercy, declares the Lord. Both great and small shall die in this land. They shall not be buried, and no one shall lament for them, or cut himself, or make himself bald for them.

No one shall break bread for the mourner, to comfort him for the dead, nor shall anyone give him the cup of consolation to drink for his father or his mother. You shall not go into the house of feasting to sit with them, to eat and drink. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will silence in this place, before your eyes and in your days, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride.

And when you tell this people all these words, and they say to you, Why has the Lord pronounced all this great evil against us? What is our iniquity? What is the sin that we have committed against the Lord our God? Then you shall say to them, Because your fathers have forsaken me, declares the Lord, and have gone after other gods, and have served and worshipped them, and have forsaken me, and have not kept my law. And because you have done worse than your fathers, for behold, every one of you follows his stubborn evil will, refusing to listen to me. Therefore I will hurl you out of this land, into a land that neither you nor your fathers have known.

And there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favour. Therefore behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, As the Lord lives, who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt, but, As the Lord lives, who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country, and out of all the countries where he had driven them. For I will bring them back to their own land, that I gave to their fathers.

Behold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the Lord, and they shall catch them. And afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks. For my eyes are on all their ways, they are not hidden from me, nor is their iniquity concealed from my eyes.

But first I will doubly repay their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations. O Lord, my strength and my stronghold, my refuge in the day of trouble, to you shall the nations come from the ends of the earth and say, Our fathers have inherited nothing but lies, worthless things, in which there is no profit. Can man make for himself gods? Such are not gods.

Therefore behold, I will make them know, this once I will make them know my power and my might, and they shall know that my name is the Lord. Jeremiah chapter 16 begins with a devastating word to the prophet. Jeremiah is instructed not to take a wife.

He must not make attachments or have dependents. The people of the place of Jerusalem are doomed to gruesome and dishonoring deaths. This isn't just a short term instruction, but a permanent one.

He is going to be assigned to the people. He is not going to put down roots. He is not

going to have social attachments.

And he is not going to seek to leave a family legacy. The instruction is particularly related to in this place. It is in Jerusalem and Judah in particular that taking a wife and bearing children would doom the prophet to such misery that it would be best for him not to attempt to do so at all.

Jeremiah is already alone. He's cut off from the people of his town. He faces opposition on all sides.

Now he won't even have a wife and a family to surround him. He is utterly alone. Not taking a wife was very rare for a Jewish man of Jeremiah's day.

Intentional celibacy was even more so. To the modern mind, forgoing sexual relations and the relational intimacy with a partner might seem to be the biggest sacrifices. But to someone of Jeremiah's day, not taking a wife and having children would have entailed a far more complete social alienation and isolation.

It would also have been devastating in not having anyone to continue your name and legacy. It was a closing off of the future and its hope. This instruction was presumably given earlier in Jeremiah's ministry, even if this prophecy comes from some time later on.

Difficult though the Lord's instruction to Jeremiah might have been, it preserved him from the full force of the judgment that was about to come upon the land. Those who had children would lose them to the most gruesome and ignominious of deaths. They would experience the cruelest sorrow and be utterly bereft.

The bodies of the people of the place would be like dung on the surface of the ground. They would suffer untimely deaths and they would not be buried. In addition to preserving Jeremiah from the full force of such a judgment, the Lord is also using Jeremiah to symbolise the aloneness and the bereftness of Judah following its judgment.

The prophet must experience the place in the light of its coming destruction. He must sever emotional and relational ties in anticipation of their hastening fate. He is living, surrounded by doomed people, and he must not get too attached.

He is instructed against going to the house of mourning. He must not lament or grieve with those who have been bereaved. Not only must he not mourn for or with these doomed people, he must not celebrate with them either.

He is instructed against participating in the festivities of weddings and other such events. The time will soon come when the silence of the grave will descend upon Jerusalem. The voices of feasting and gladness, the voices of weddings, will all be silenced in an instant, and a city full of the hubbub of voices will become a desolate

tomb.

In all of this, along with his message, Jeremiah serves as a sign for the people. Seeing the prophet without hope of a family for the future, seeing the prophet not participating in the basic cycles of life, the weddings and the funerals of the city, should be a sign to them that all of that is about to be cut off for them. Jeremiah is, as it were, a man from a future time, a time of desolation, who has been sent back to live in this city in which the regular patterns of life continue as they have ever done.

His presence in the city, along with his message, is a constant, irritating, incessant reminder of what is about to befall. However, when Jeremiah brings his message to the people, their response will be to question what their iniquity is. They can't acknowledge that they have done anything wrong.

Self-righteous, they will question why judgement will come upon them. They still can't understand. The Lord gives Jeremiah the indictment upon them.

The people's fathers forsook him to serve other gods, and they did not just continue in the ways of their fathers. They have acted in a manner that is worse than that of their fathers. They have forsaken the Lord for idols, and in their own stubborn will, they have refused to listen to the Lord or to obey him.

As a result, he is going to give them over to their will. As they have turned aside after other gods that they have not known, so they will go to a land that neither they nor their fathers have known, and there they will experience cruel bondage to the gods that they once went after, serving them day and night. The Lord has cut off his favour from them.

Life in the land, as we see in verse 3, depends upon the peace of the Lord, his steadfast love and his mercy, and those things have been cut off. They have been left to their own devices, they have been given up, and as a result, they are doomed to the most bitter of fates. Verses 14-15 inject a note of hope into this declaration of judgement.

The prophet declares that days are coming in which the Lord's deliverance of them from exile will be seen as an action that exceeds the action of his deliverance of them from Egypt. A similar formula is also seen in Jeremiah 7.32. There is hope in the Lord's statement here, but the hope is that of the light at the end of a very deep and dark tunnel. Before the hope of that light will really begin to be felt by them, they must first enter into the darkness.

The prophecy of restoration is delivered in the form of a statement concerning vows that people will take in the name of the Lord, in which the name of the Lord is attached to actions by which his character and his might have been displayed. In chapter 4 verses 1-2 we read, The vow form here might imply the blessings that the nations will declare in the name of the Lord when they see his deliverance of his people. However, before

deliverance can be known, the judgement must first fall.

The Lord is sending fishers and hunters to catch them. No mountain, no crevice, will be sufficient to hide them from being trapped by these skilled men. The Lord has seen everything that they have done.

Their iniquity is known to him, so he has appointed people to track them down, to pursue them, to catch them, and to bring them to judgement. On account of their idolatries, their iniquity will be paid back double. Once again in verses 19-20 a note of hope enters in.

Like the psalmist often does, Jeremiah speaks of the Lord as his strength and stronghold, his refuge in the day of trouble. Back in chapter 3 verse 17 we read, At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem. They shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart.

Similar descriptions of the conversion and repentance of the nations can be seen in places like Isaiah chapter 2. Here the nations are going to realise the futility of their idolatry. The Lord has delivered his people. In the Exodus he proved his might over the gods of the Egyptians.

And now once again in Israel's history, he has proved his power. The nations will see it. They will repent of their idolatries, and they will turn to the Lord.

They turn away from the worthless things that they have inherited from their fathers, literally the vapour that they once depended upon. The idols are emptiness. They are not able to save.

They are not gods. This is a common theme in the prophets. The incomparability and the uniqueness of God is demonstrated in his future salvation of his people.

God is unique as creator. God is unique as the one who governs history. And God will demonstrate his uniqueness in the fulfilment of his promises, the judgement of the wicked and the deliverance of his people.

A question to consider. In 1 Corinthians chapter 7, the apostle Paul, who also did not take a wife, teaches the Corinthians that there are some situations where it is better not to marry, most particularly in the present distress of those days. In what ways is Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 similar in its reasoning to the Lord's instruction to Jeremiah here? In what significant ways is it different? I appeal to you brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement.

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you my

brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas, or I follow Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.

I did baptize also the household of Stephanus. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

For Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, and folly to Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. Paul begins his first epistle to the Corinthians, introducing himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will. Paul generally, but not always, introduces himself in his letters as an apostle, the epistles to the Thessalonians being the main exception to the norm.

He writes as one called person to a body of called people, and he writes with a co-author, Sosthenes. Sosthenes may have been a fellow worker we don't read of elsewhere. Sosthenes wasn't an uncommon name.

Some have argued that he might have been Paul's amanuensis, as we learn in chapter 16 verse 21 that Paul hadn't written most of the letter in his own writing, presumably having someone else to write it for him. However, it seems most likely to me that Sosthenes was the same man as the one mentioned in Acts chapter 18 verse 17, the account of Paul's first visit to Corinth. And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal.

The Corinthians have been set apart by God, called to be holy, part of a wider body of Christians around the world who call on the name of Jesus, bound together by their common Lord. Paul's opening benediction, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, is quite characteristic of his work. The life of the church and every Christian is founded upon this grace and peace, so it's entirely appropriate that it would be to this that Paul appeals at the beginning of his epistles.

Paul had first visited Corinth in Acts chapter 18. In verses 1 to 11 of that chapter we

read, When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, Your blood be on your own heads.

I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles. And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshipper of God.

His house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord together with his entire household, and many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.

And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. Paul often begins his letters with thanksgiving. Here he gives thanks for the entire span of the salvation that the Corinthians enjoy, from its first incipents in the work of the gospel arriving among them, to the faithful empowering and sustaining of Christ as they wait for his appearing, to the vindication that they will receive on the great and final day of the Lord.

God has called them into the fellowship of his Son, and he is faithful to confirm them in that fellowship and preserve them to the end. In verse 10, Paul gets right to the point of his letter, appealing to the Corinthians to be in agreement, to avoid division, and to be united in mind and judgment. He has heard from Chloe's people that there are divisions among them.

Chloe was possibly a business person, whose servants had brought news to Paul. The Corinthians had become sectarian, with various parties opening up among them, with different members identifying with different teachers and leaders, some with Paul, some with Peter or Cephas, some with Apollos, and some with Christ. Paul will later argue for a proper way of considering the relationship between different ministers.

However, with a number of prominent and charismatic leaders, it was not surprising that the Corinthians would form parties around their favourite figures in ways that led to division and sectarianism in the congregation. The Church, as will become clear in chapter 12, is characterised by diversity, but a diversity through which unity is achieved through many gifts being exercised in different ways for the common good. The mind that the Church has should not be sectarian either, because the one mind of Christ is that mind mentioned in chapter 2 verse 16.

The different ministers in the Church should be regarded not as competitors, but as collaborators in a grand shared task, each performing different roles in a way that is complementary, not competitive. Paul argues this in chapter 3. Christ is undivided. He unites all true ministers.

Christ isn't the head of a sect of his own alongside the sect of Peter and Paul and Apollos. He is the one to whom all are subject, and the one that all serve. Paul presses this point further.

Paul was not crucified for the Corinthians. Christ's cross, which Paul proclaims, is unique. It's an event that defines all Christians, whoever their more immediate leaders might be.

What Paul is doing here is simply applying the teaching of Christ himself from Matthew chapter 23 verses 8 to 12. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father who is in heaven.

Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Just as Paul wasn't crucified for the Corinthians, they weren't baptised in his name. Baptism is for Paul an event that has a defining force for the Christian. It seals them as Christ's people.

However, the identity of the minister who performs the baptism is irrelevant. What matters is that it is baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that it is baptism into Christ, into his death and resurrection. Given the existence of these misunderstandings among the Corinthians, Paul is thankful that he only baptised a few of them.

Had he baptised more of them, they might have been tempted to think that their baptism by Paul made them members of a special group of Pauline believers, members of a party associated with Paul. However, Christ had not sent Paul to baptise, but to preach the gospel. Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus, a servant of his Lord, not a man forming his own movement.

If he had a ministry focused upon baptism, he might have been a new sort of John the Baptist. The people baptised by John were associated with John, and many of them became his disciples. Paul baptised, but his ministry was not one of baptism.

There was no baptism of Paul, as there had been a baptism of John. Rather, Paul was the bearer of a message. The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the declaration of the kingdom and the lordship of Jesus the Messiah.

Although Paul was a profoundly gifted rhetorician, his skills clearly being on display here and throughout this letter, the point of his preaching was not eloquence, but direct presentation of the cross of Christ, where the real power lies, not in Paul's golden tongue. Had Paul's ministry been one of eloquent wisdom, the danger would have been that Paul's rhetorical gifts would have eclipsed the message he was proclaiming and the

master he was serving. It was all about Christ for Paul, and anything that Paul did that distracted from that, or eclipsed that, would have been illegitimate.

However, at the very heart of the Christian gospel lies the reality of the cross, the stark and brutal execution of Jesus of Nazareth on a tree by the Romans. This stands in the starkest possible contrast to any religion that is preoccupied with competitive social alignment and rhetorical artistry, all of which belong to the manner of this present age. The word of the cross is considered foolishness by all who operate on this age's terms, those who are perishing.

However, to those who are being saved, it is recognised in all of its startling alienness as the power of God himself. Paul cites Isaiah chapter 29 verse 14 here. Beginning at verse 13, this passage reads, And the Lord said, Because this people draw near me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.

This is also a theme that Jesus brings out in his own teaching, perhaps most famously in Matthew chapter 11 verses 25 to 27. At that time Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. The cross is scandalous, it's offensive, it's foolish to the sensibilities and the expectations of both Jews and Gentiles. If you were a shrewd marketer of the Christian message, you would probably downplay all of the cross stuff and major on Jesus as a wise teacher instead.

If you emphasised Jesus as a great philosopher and religious teacher, the Greeks wouldn't have so much of a problem dealing with the fact that he was killed by the authorities who resisted his wisdom. They had Socrates. The Jews could deal with a great and powerful prophet who performed mighty signs, yet was martyred by wicked leaders.

There were several such figures in their history. However, accenting the cross as he did made Paul's message of the gospel seem nonsensical and offensive to both parties. There might be ways artfully to weave the shame, humiliation and rejection of the cross into an appealing story of Jesus, but to lead with these things is ridiculous and foolish.

Yet God's power and wisdom are in direct conflict with the wisdom of the world, and cannot be recognised by the wise of this age. Of course, the cross isn't ultimately foolish, but it seems as such to those of this age who operate on this world's terms, those whose

eyes have been opened by God, where the Jews or Gentiles can see it, but others cannot. The cross, which seems the moment of greatest impotence, is the moment of God's power overcoming the world.

The supposed foolishness of God is beyond the fathoming of human wisdom, and the imagined weakness of God is stronger than all of the strength of men. In speaking in such a manner, Paul undermines the forces animating the struggle for status among the Corinthians. The cross of Christ nullifies and renders foolish the quest for status and power and wisdom that preoccupies people.

It reveals that true wisdom, true honour and true power lies somewhere where people are least likely to look for it. Paul, by stripping away the pretensions of eloquence, of status and human power, wishes the Corinthians to see that the power, the wisdom and the honour always lay in the cross itself, and in doing this he wants to accomplish a revolution in their values which would result in a transformation of their behaviour as they saw that the things that really mattered were not the things that they were preoccupied with, the things that led to the divisions and the conflicts among them. A question to consider, what are some ways in which we are in danger of drawing attention away from the wisdom, power and glory of God out of shame and embarrassment about the cross, seeking to appeal to typical notions of human wisdom, power and glory in their place?