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January 30th: Jeremiah 29 & 1 Corinthians 14:1-19

January 29, 2021



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Jeremiah's letter to the exiles. Tongues speaking.

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

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 29. These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. This was after King Jechoniah and the Queen Mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem.

The letter was sent by the hand of Elisha the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said, The Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name. I did not send them, declares the Lord.

For thus says the Lord, when seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you,

and I will fulfil to you my promise, and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me, and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord. And I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord.

And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. Because you have said, the Lord has raised up prophets for us in Babylon. Thus says the Lord concerning the king who sits on the throne of David, and concerning all the people who dwell in this city, your kinsmen who did not go out with you into exile.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold, I am sending on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like vile figs that are so rotten they cannot be eaten. I will pursue them with sword, famine, and pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse, a terror, a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them. Because they did not pay attention to my words, declares the Lord, that I persistently sent to you by my servants the prophets.

But you would not listen, declares the Lord. Hear the word of the Lord, all you exiles whom I sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab the son of Caliah, and Zedekiah the son of Maseah, who are prophesying a lie to you in my name.

Behold, I will deliver them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and he shall strike them down before your eyes. Because of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah in Babylon. The Lord make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire, because they have done an outrageous thing in Israel.

They have committed adultery with their neighbors' wives, and they have spoken in my name, lying words that I did not command them. I am the one who knows, and I am witness, declares the Lord. To Shimea of Nethilim you shall say, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, you have sent letters in your name to all the people who are in Jerusalem, and to Zephaniah the son of Maseah the priest, and to all the priests, saying, The Lord has made you priest instead of Jehoiada the priest, to have charge in the house of the Lord over every madman who prophesies, to put him in the stocks and neck irons.

Now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth, who is prophesying to you? For he has sent to us in Babylon, saying, Your exile will be long. Build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat their produce. Zephaniah the priest read this letter in the hearing of Jeremiah the prophet.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, sent to all the exiles, saying, Thus says the Lord concerning Shimea of Nethilim, Because Shimea had prophesied to you when I did not send him, and has made you trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord, Behold, I will punish Shimea of Nethilim and his descendants. He shall not have anyone living among this people, and he shall not see the good that I will do to my people, declares the Lord.

For he has spoken rebellion against the Lord. Jeremiah chapter 29 contains two letters written on two separate occasions by Jeremiah to the Babylonian exiles. The principal letter is addressed to the exiles more generally, and the second to a specific prophet among them, who opposed the word of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah's first letter was addressed to the surviving elders of the exiles, the priests, the prophets, and all of the people among them. Some of the oldest generation of the exiles may have already died, and it refers to the surviving exiles here. And with their deaths, the Jewish exile community would increasingly be wondering about how to approach their lives in exile.

Some prophets, both from Jerusalem and among their own number, have been reassuring them that their exile will be of short duration. Should they all be braced for return? Should they expect a longer exile? Is there any real hope of a return at all? These are the questions that Jeremiah addresses within his letter. Earlier, when Jeremiah had been put on trial, a hycum, the son of Shaphan, had intervened on his behalf to protect him from being put to death.

In this chapter, another son of Shaphan, Elissa, carries Jeremiah's letter to the Judahite exiles. Considering the friendship that Jeremiah seems to have had with the family of Shaphan, it is possible that this was sent informally, as something entrusted personally, rather than as part of the official business that Zedekiah has sent the men on. Gemariah, Elissa's companion, may perhaps have been the son of the high priest who found the book of the law in the temple.

The Judahite exiles in Babylon seem to have had some measure of freedom. They don't seem to be prisoners of war, and maybe not even a slave population. Jeremiah's message is that they should settle into a longer term exile, recognising that the rest of their lives will be lived in Babylon.

The language of building and planting is used here, albeit in a very surprising context. This language should be familiar to us from chapter 1, verses 9 and 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. In this address to the Judahite exiles, the building and the planting is taking place in a foreign land. They are building

houses and living in them, planting gardens and eating their produce.

The sort of activities that he recommends here are the sort of long-term life activities, building houses, planting gardens, taking wives and starting families, taking wives for their sons and giving their daughters in marriage. They must be prepared to settle down into life in Babylon. They are going to be there for several decades.

To the extent that they expected an imminent return, they would be afraid of making these longer term decisions. You wouldn't start a family in Babylon if you thought you were going to return within a couple of years. They are instructed to prosper there, to multiply.

The calling for them to be fruitful and multiply in a foreign land should remind us of the way that the Israelites multiplied in the days before the Exodus. Even in a foreign land, they can prosper and grow as a people. And with this recognition that they will be spending many years in exile in Babylon, their posture towards the land of their exile must change.

They must seek the welfare of the city. First of all, they should not rebel against it. They should also pray for its good and seek its well-being.

They should commit themselves to being peaceful and upstanding participants in its civic life. They need to recognize that they share in common with the Babylonians a common good and they should serve that to the extent that they can. The instruction to pray for the good of the land of their exile would have been a difficult one for many of them to hear.

But yet throughout the book of Jeremiah, the Lord reassures his people of his hand behind all of these events. The Lord is the one who has raised up Babylon. The Lord is the one who in time will destroy Babylon too.

By seeking the good of Babylonia during this period, the exiles of Judah are putting their fate in the hand of God, recognizing that he is the one who is sovereign over the empire that has taken them exiles. The city that is referenced here is likely not a particular city. The exiles are probably separated in several different locations.

The Lord warns the exiles against listening to the prophets and diviners among them who are giving them a false message of hope concerning their soon return. The Lord has not sent them and their message is not true. The reference to diviners here also suggests that pagan practices were still being practiced among the exiles even after they had been thrown out of the land as a result of these sins.

While the false hope of these prophets was appealing, it was a very dangerous thing. Such messages could have inspired the Jews to revolt and brought destruction upon the community more generally. By contrast, the Lord's instruction to live peaceably until the

time when he released them would secure the long-term well-being of the exile community.

A time is set for the return from exile. Seventy years will be completed for Babylon and then the Lord will visit them. This need not necessarily be taken as a reference to the time when Jerusalem will be rebuilt and people will start to return to the land.

The reference may more be to the end of the reign of Babylon as their empire is taken over and the situation of Judah changes. While some of the exiles might have considered their position to be hopeless, the Lord still has good intentions for his people. He has not abandoned them to their fate.

If they will merely trust in the word of his prophet and follow his instruction, then a future of blessing awaits them. God's ultimate intent has always been for their good. In time he will reverse their fortunes.

Throughout the book of Jeremiah there are several references back to the book of Deuteronomy. And here I think we hear the language of Deuteronomy coming through again. Deuteronomy chapter 4 verses 27-31 The statements that the Lord makes to the Judahite exiles here are not just conditional ones.

The statement he makes is not if you call upon me, but you will call upon me. Their repentance is promised, not just restoration conditional upon their repentance. The Lord will turn their hearts back to himself.

Once again this will remind us of the words of Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1-6 Once again the Lord cautions against false impressions. False impressions for the outlook of Jerusalem and its people and rulers. False impressions that have been given through false prophets.

There is an allusion back to chapter 24 here and the vision of the good and the bad figs. The people left in the city of Jerusalem are rotten figs, vile figs that cannot be eaten. All that awaits them is sword, famine and pestilence, the consequence of being besieged by the empire of Babylon.

Once again the characteristic language of desolation is used. This fate comes upon them because of their failure to heed the word of the Lord. The fundamental task of Israel was always to hear the word of the Lord.

The Lord also pronounces judgement upon two particular false prophets among the people. Ahab the son of Goliath and Zedekiah the son of Maseah are both prophesying falsely in his name. Presumably they are declaring an imminent release from exile.

The Lord however will deliver these two false prophets into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and they will be executed by him, presumably for stirring up rebellion

against him. They will suffer a gruesome execution of being roasted in the fire. This will come upon them not just because of their false prophecies but also because they are both guilty of the sin of adultery.

The Lord knows the secrets of men's heart. Both false prophecy and adultery carry the death penalty and the Lord will bring this punishment upon these two false prophets by his word. Confrontations with false prophets continue in the chapter.

Shimea the son of Nehelam, one of the prophets who was among the exiles, has sent messages to the people in Jerusalem and to Zephaniah the priest to treat Jeremiah like a madman and lock him up in the stocks for his raving. Referring back to Jeremiah's prophecy in the first letter that their exile would be long, that they should build houses and live in them and plant gardens and eat their produce, he charges them to rebuke Jeremiah and to dismiss him as a prophet. He calls upon Zephaniah to execute his responsibility as a priest in this matter and not to let Jeremiah go.

Zephaniah, however, does not carry it out but reads the letter to Jeremiah. Jeremiah responds by declaring the Lord's judgement upon Shimea. The Lord will surely visit and bless his people but Shimea and his offspring will be cut off.

They will not see any of the good that God has planned for his people. A question to consider. How might the Lord's instruction to the Judahite exiles instruct us in the way that we live in non-Christian societies? In what ways might our situation be similar to that of the exiles in Babylon? In what ways might it be different? 1 Corinthians 14 verses 1-19 Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy.

The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets so that the church may be built up. Now brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning.

But if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker a foreigner to me. So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church. Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret.

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also. I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.

Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say, Amen, to your thanksgiving, when he does not know what you are saying? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

1 Corinthians chapter 14 continues the discussion of behaviour in gathered worship that has been going on since chapter 11 verse 2, and the discussion of spiritual gifts that has been going on since chapter 12 verse 1. Paul is dealing with a chaotic worship situation in the city of Corinth. There's competitive demonstration of spiritual gifts, there's unintelligible speech, there's people speaking over each other, there's all sorts of disorder going on. And part of it seems to arise from a seeming overvaluation of the gift of tongues.

Elsewhere, the gift of tongues is presented as a phenomenon that occurs when the spirit rests upon people. In Acts chapter 2 verse 1 to 4, when the day of Pentecost arrived they were all together in one place, and suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them, and rested on each one of them.

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts chapter 10 verses 44 to 46. While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.

And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles, for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Acts chapter 19 verse 6. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. In Numbers chapter 11 verses 24 to 25, we have the description of spontaneous prophecy occurring when the Spirit comes upon the elders.

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him, and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not continue doing it.

In 1 Samuel chapter 10 verse 10, speaking of Saul, when they came to Gibeah, behold a group of prophets met him, and the Spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied among them. In these descriptions of the gifts of tongues and prophecy, they seem to have a more ecstatic character to them. They are dramatic signs associated with the descent of the Spirit upon a personal group.

Unsurprisingly, given the spirituality that was practiced by the Corinthians, these sorts of dramatic gifts would be very attractive to them. Chapter 13 was not a digression from Paul's argument, and the first verse of this chapter applies the force of it to the spiritual gifts. Love must be the touchstone of all practice in this area.

Chapters 12 to 14 are all a single undivided argument. Chapter 12 concerns diverse spiritual gifts that are given for the sake of edification, building up, and for unity. They are expressive of the one Spirit that we all share in.

They are not merely for those with more dramatic gifts. Chapter 13 speaks of the indispensability of love, the moderating character of love, and the enduring nature of love. Once the centrality of love is appreciated, the spiritual gifts will be practiced in a far more edifying and appropriate manner.

Paul does not dismiss the spiritual gifts. They are to pursue spiritual speech, but especially prophecy, for the reasons that he goes on to discuss. When we read about the verbal content of tongue-speaking in places like Acts 2, we are told that it was praise of God.

But the description of tongue-speaking in 1 Corinthians has led most commentators to argue that they are not the intelligible languages that we see in Acts 2. This is not an unreasonable interpretation. Rather, it seems that what Paul is describing in Corinth is a sort of ecstatic speech. It is not necessarily a language.

In the Old Testament, for instance, there are a number of different ways of speaking of prophecy. When we are told that the elders prophesied, we shouldn't presume that they were delivering the sort of prophecy that we find in the Book of Isaiah. Likewise, when Saul prophesies, it seems to have been a more ecstatic experience, much as we see variety in the way that prophecy functions in the Old Testament, and different levels of prophetic speech and phenomena.

So, tongue-speaking in the New Testament seems to have involved, in some cases, actual languages, and in other cases just ecstatic speech. The person who engages in such ecstatic speech speaks mysteries in the spirit. By mysteries here, I think Paul is referring to unintelligible things.

Nobody understands what is said. He says that the one who speaks in tongues builds up himself. Does that mean it's self-edification? Or rather, is he saying that the person who is speaking in tongues in this way in the congregation is merely bolstering their own self-importance? I think it might be the latter.

Public tongue-speaking has become such a matter of status-seeking and demonstration of individual spiritual power that Paul has to challenge it quite forcefully at some points. This wouldn't be the first time in scripture that something that was given by God for the

building up of his people and their benefit came to be used for damaging or even idolatrous purposes. The bronze serpent that the Lord had given to Israel in the wilderness had to be removed by Hezekiah in the book of 2 Kings chapter 18, as Israel had started to treat it like an idol.

In contrast to their tongue-speaking, prophecy is intelligible speech that builds others up. Anthony Thistleton persuasively argues that rather than the interpretation of tongues being spoken up here, what is meant is the tongue-speaker's own capacity to put their speech into intelligible words. So what we see on the day of Pentecost, for instance, is a more elevated form of the gift, the exciting of the tongue of the speaker by the spirit that enables them to speak intelligibly in another language.

However, when tongue-speaking isn't an intelligible language, it's of little benefit. It's not communicating anything. Paul gives a number of examples of the failure or breakdown of communication.

Musical instruments that do not give distinct notes are like tongues that aren't speaking a language. They leave us unable to recognise what is being played. Likewise, instruments that are designed to give a military signal must do so clearly.

These illustrations suggest that we are not dealing with regular languages here. There are also problems when a meaningful, yet foreign, language is spoken. Where we do not have the understanding of the language, the experience of hearing a foreign tongue being spoken can simply make us feel like a foreigner to the speaker.

Far from bringing people into greater unity, it divides people. It has a Babelic effect. The Corinthians must learn from this.

The most important thing is to build others up. They are eager for manifestations of the spirit, but this should be for the end of building up others in the church, not for puffing themselves up. The tongue-speaker then needs to pray that he will be able to put his communication into intelligible words.

The Corinthians probably thought that they were speaking in angelic languages. Paul doesn't deny that their speech is a manifestation of the spirit, but he does greatly downplay the gift. Such ecstatic speech can be a way of the spirit addressing itself to God, but it isn't a language.

Tongue-speaking in private prayer can be an expression of the person's spirit to God, much as the babblings and the gurglings of a baby might be an expression of their appreciation for or their need for their parent. But the ideal is to speak to God in intelligible words, so that your understanding is also involved, so that both you and others can say Amen. The true work of the spirit is not like that of pagan religion, which privileges ecstatic phenomena of spiritually elevated individuals.

Rather, the spirit is about intelligible and reasonable communication for the purpose of edification. The irrational ecstasies of pagan religion do not have a proper place within the life of the church. Paul points out that he is more gifted in tongues than any of the Corinthians.

He's not saying he speaks in tongues more than any of them, as some translations put it, but he's stressing that he has this gift in great measure. However, intelligible communication must take priority in the gathered assembly, and Paul would prefer speaking five intelligible words with his mind than many thousands in unintelligible speech. A question to consider, how might Paul's emphasis upon intelligible communication over ecstatic utterances or dramatic phenomena and the like in gathered worship help us in thinking about our worship and its proper forms?