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January 20th: Jeremiah 19 & 1 Corinthians 4:1-17

January 19, 2021



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Breaking Judah like an earthenware decanter. Paul challenges the Corinthians' over-realized eschatology.

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

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Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 19. Thus says the Lord, Go by a potter's earthenware flask, and take some of the elders of the people, and some of the elders of the priests, and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom, at the entry of the potsherd gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you. You shall say, Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah, and inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place, that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle, because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of innocents, and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree,

nor did it come into my mind. Therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter, and in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the earth, and I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at, everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its wounds, and I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and everyone shall eat the flesh of his neighbour in the siege and in the distress with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them.

Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, So will I break this people and this city as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended. Men shall bury in Topheth, because there will be no place else to bury. Thus will I do to this place, declares the Lord, and to its inhabitants, making this city like Topheth.

The houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah, all the houses on whose roofs offerings have been offered to all the hosts of heaven, and drink-offerings have been poured out to other gods, shall be defiled like the place of Topheth. Then Jeremiah came from Topheth, where the Lord had sent him to prophesy, and he stood in the court of the Lord's house, and said to all the people, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing upon this city, and upon all its towns, all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words. The metaphor of the potter and the clay was introduced in chapter 18, now it is developed further in chapter 19.

This chapter should be connected with the oracles of chapter 7 verse 30 to chapter 8 verse 3. For the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, declares the Lord. They have set their detestable things in the house that is called by my name, to defile it. And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.

Therefore behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter, for they will bury in Topheth, because there is no room elsewhere. And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away. And I will silence in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, for the land shall become a waste.

At that time, declares the Lord, the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its officials,

the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem shall be brought out of their tombs, and they shall be spread before the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven, which they have loved and served, which they have gone after, and which they have sought and worshipped. And they shall not be gathered or buried, they shall be as dung on the surface of the ground. Death shall be preferred to life by all the remnant that remains of this evil family, in all the places where I have driven them, declares the Lord of hosts.

The narrative here provides a background for earlier oracles. We should remember that the material of Jeremiah is not placed in chronological order. A similar connection can be seen between chapter 26 and Jeremiah's temple sermon in chapter 7 verses 1 to 15.

Chapter 19 expands upon the material of chapters 7 to 8. Jack Lumbum argues that verses 1 to 13 are four oracles in prose narrative form, the second half of verse 3 to verse 5, 6 to 9, the second half of verse 11, and then verses 12 to 13. These are broken into two by directives given to Jeremiah in verses 1 to the first half of verse 3 and verse 10 to the first half of verse 11. There is a similar opening to this chapter as there is to chapter 13, where Jeremiah was instructed to buy the lawn cloth.

This time he is buying a flask or decanter. Lumbum notes that it is generally identified as an expensive ring-burnished decanter. He is witnessed by elders of the people and elders of the priests.

These are leading figures and Jeremiah presumably has their attention at this point. He has been instructed to perform this symbolic action by the Lord and he will perform it before prominent representatives of the authorities. This is performed in the valley of the son of Hinnom.

In chapter 28 verses 1 to 3 of 2nd Chronicles and in chapter 33 verses 1 to 6 of 2nd Chronicles, Ahaz and Manasseh had both burned their sons in this valley. In 2nd Kings chapter 23 verse 10 we read of King Josiah, he defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no one might burn his son or his daughter as an offering to Molech. The worship of Molech and the practice of child sacrifice in the context of it was a particularly serious form of idolatry that is spoken of on several occasions in scripture.

Topheth in the valley of the son of Hinnom had become synonymous with this particularly egregious form of child sacrifice. In Leviticus chapter 20 verses 2 to 5 we read, Say to the people of Israel, any one of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones.

I myself will set my face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean and to profane my holy name. And if the people of the land do at all close their eyes to that

man when he gives one of his children to Molech and do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man and against his clan and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech. The practice of sacrificing children to Molech is condemned on several other occasions in scripture.

In Psalm 106 verses 36 to 39, They served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons. They poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan.

And the land was polluted with blood. Thus they became unclean by their acts and played the whore in their deeds. Archaeological work has confirmed claims about child sacrifice and the worship of Molech in related cults in various parts of the ancient Mediterranean world.

The practice of child sacrifice to Molech in Israel was drawn from the Canaanites, who probably took it from the Tyrians. Jeremiah goes out to the valley by way of the Potsherd Gate, presumably a place of broken pottery. This would be a very suitable location for Jeremiah's prophetic condemnation and his symbolic act.

It is also identified as the Dung Gate, which would also be symbolically fitting for his prophecy. The Lord is going to bring a signal disaster upon them on account of their idolatry and their violence. While the expression in verse 6, Behold the days are coming, often introduces positive messages of anticipated salvation, here it introduces a statement of the most severe judgment.

and dishonor, erasing its former identity. The valley of the Son of Hinnom is the New Testament Gehenna, which is a powerful image of hell in the Gospels. It will become a site where many bodies are disposed of like rubbish, without the dignity of a proper burial, their bones picked clean by scavengers and bleached under the sun.

Judah had sacrificed their children in that location and now their own bodies will be cast there. Judah itself will become a warning sign of the Lord's judgment, a cautionary tale, a byword among passers-by who would remark upon its grim fate. Indeed, when the siege came upon them, the people who had offered their children to idols would eat their own children's flesh.

We might here remember the story of the two women in the siege of Samaria in 2 Kings chapter 6. One of the most serious curses of the covenant was also concerning this eating of children. In Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 53-57 As he has nothing else left, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in all your towns, the most tender and refined woman among you, who would not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground because she is so delicate and tender, will be grudged the husband she embraces, to her son and to her daughter, her afterbirth that comes out

from between her feet, and her children whom she bears, because lacking everything she will eat them secretly, in the siege and in the distress with which your enemy shall distress you in your towns. Jeremiah was instructed to break the decanter as a symbolic act before the witnesses who represented the people and their leaders.

They too will be broken beyond repair and their waste pieces will be cast in topheth, and the rest of the city itself will become like that defiled topheth. The chapter ends with Jeremiah returning to Jerusalem where he declares judgement again in the court of the temple. A question to consider, reading chapter 18 verses 1-12 and chapter 19 verses 1-13 alongside each other, how should we relate their two sets of narratives and oracles concerning Judah and pottery? 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 1-17 This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful, but with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact I do not even judge myself, for I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favour of one against another.

For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? Already you have all you want, already you have become rich, without us you have become kings, and would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you. For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ.

We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labour, working with our own hands.

When reviled we bless, when persecuted we endure, when slandered we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.

For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you then, be imitators of me.

That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. In 1 Corinthians chapter 4 Paul continues the argument of the preceding chapter, for the Corinthians who have been elevating ministers and missionaries above their proper station, it is important to establish some sense of proper proportion. Paul, Apollos, Cephas and others are simply servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

They must be faithful and ultimately are answerable to the judgment of the Lord alone. The court of human opinion is not the court about which Paul is most concerned. In chapter 2 verse 15 he made a similar point.

The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. Because they aren't acting for the court of human opinion, the whole game of status-seeking that the Corinthians are so concerned about is abandoned. Rather, the apostles must seek the approval of the Lord, who is their master, the one to whom they are ultimately answerable.

The judgment and the praise of the Lord must be patiently awaited, and until it comes the ministers of Christ must be trustworthy, recognising that they must give an account of their service to God. They don't indulge in boasting and the pursuit of status, because this is to seek approval from the wrong source. It is also a characteristic of the flesh, which is pompous, prideful and puffed up, is overly concerned with the praise of a human audience and unmindful of God.

Paul has to this point spoken as if he were merely writing about how other people viewed him, Apollos and Cephas and a few others. Yet it becomes apparent that Paul was speaking to broader and deeper problems in the Church by using himself and Apollos as examples. The real parties causing the problem are modestly veiled by the fact that Paul uses himself and Apollos as the case studies, so that the Corinthians might learn the proper principles by examining their cases.

The principle here is that they should not go beyond what is written. In this case I think that Paul means by this strange statement the message of the Gospel. Going beyond that message would involve adding to the truth of the cross in ways that the Corinthians had clearly been doing, with notions of super-spirituality, status-seeking and human wisdom.

And recognising the scriptural testimony to the truth of the cross as God's wisdom, their competitive struggle for honour and status would be abandoned. The cross is the most basic and foundational truth and they must never leave it behind. Once the Corinthians have grasped the basics that Paul has been teaching, they should recognise that there is nothing in them, considered in themselves, that sets them apart from or above others.

As Paul wrote back in chapter 1 verse 30, And because of him you are in Christ Jesus,

who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Everything that they have in the way of standing has been received as a gift from God, so it is ridiculous to act as if they hadn't received it, as if they naturally possessed it. The next section of this passage drips with irony.

The Corinthians seemingly had extreme notions of conversion, notions of conversion characterised by what some have called over-realised eschatology. They were acting as if they already enjoyed the fullness of the kingdom and the full measure of the spirit, failing to appreciate just how far short they fell and how far off these things were in their full enjoyment. This sort of super-spirituality had little place for the cross.

It was about power, about elevated spiritual status and radical freedom. And Paul will have a lot to say to challenge such a spirituality over the course of this letter. Here, he tackles it by presenting an ironic portrayal of such a spirituality.

He holds it up for some ridicule and contrasts it with the reality that he and the other apostles face on the ground. The Corinthians think of themselves as kings, as those who are rich, as people who reign and who have the fullness of what they want. They are already acting as if they were living in the age to come.

They have seemingly entered into this consummation of the kingdom in the absence of Paul and his companions. The Corinthians seem to imagine themselves as if in some great triumphal procession, leading the way at the front. And yet, in that great triumphal procession, where are Paul and the apostles to be found? They are not the kings leading at the front.

They are more like the gladiators at the very rear. They are condemned to struggle to the death in the arena, and their sufferings are like a grand spectacle before the whole cosmos. Isn't it strange that the Corinthians see themselves as wise, strong and honoured, when the apostles' experience is the exact opposite? In the starkest of contrasts, Paul describes the positions of the apostles, and how completely alien to the supposed experience of the Corinthians' super-spiritual Christians it is.

Far from experiencing constant victory, from reigning like kings, from enjoying extreme riches, superior wisdom and radical liberty, the experience of the apostles is one of suffering. Daily hardship, lack, hunger and thirst, persecution, rejection, ridicule and dishonour. However, in this difficult situation they respond according to the mind of Christ.

They respond to cursing with blessing, to persecution with endurance, to slander with kindness. Just as Christ was cut off by the world at the cross, his faithful followers are regarded as if they were the scum of the earth, refused to be thrown out. The point of all of this is not to shame the Corinthians.

However, of all the people that ministered to the Corinthians, few could claim to stand in the position of a father. Paul, however, can speak to them like a father. He became their father as one who first delivered the gospel to them.

They are seen as his dear children. He has a peculiar interest in and concern for their spiritual well-being, greater than any of those who are simply like their guardians. As a father figure, he has an especial responsibility to give an example and training to them.

And for this reason, he is sending Timothy to them, whom he describes as his loved son. Timothy is the appointed son who represents and acts on behalf of his father. He is also a model son.

He is the image of his father. He will remind them of Paul's way of life by his own behaviour. Timothy will provide them with a good model to emulate and a pattern for their own growth.

A question to consider, what are some of the forms that the era of the Corinthians discussed in this chapter can take in the contemporary church?