

Jeremiah's Annunciation

As I stand and preach, there's a bunch of people keeping an eye on me.

Not those for whom the sermon has been written – sitting in the pews and now also watching live online from other parts of the world. By and large, members of the congregation here like a sermon and listen with as much attention and interest as I've ever known.

No – there's a bunch of people keeping an eye on the preacher in this pulpit that most of the congregation can't see at all.

On my left there's Isaiah, Moses, Ezekiel, Samuel and David and on my right, Daniel, one I can't identify, Jonah, John the Baptist and the one who is the object of our attention this morning.

Jeremiah appears twice, as some of these saints in stained glass do in our transepts. One rolling up his

scroll at the end of his life and once gazing out at Jerusalem in Ruins.

With a couple of ancillary figures, there's a grand total of 21 bearded men gazing down on anyone who dares to preach in this pulpit.

Twenty one beards. I've counted them. And that is not to start on those who gaze out at us in the nave or in the East and West windows.

There is a dominant aesthetic at work in our windows which does seem to suggest that fine bushy beards are one of the attributes of holiness.

It is patriarchal religion doing its thing.

It isn't particularly surprising that people end up with a dominant image of God being an old man in the sky if we think of holiness in this way.

Women didn't get much of a look in, in this place when the stained glass scheme was being devised.

It is into precisely such a world view that God appears with a bit of a surprise this morning.

We are often so familiar with scripture that we can't hear the surprises.

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” God says to Jeremiah.

And it should be a bit of a surprise to us that God declares that God has been pregnant with Jeremiah.

But the Hebrew allows us that reading if we chose to take it.

As I look on Jeremiah this morning, I am hearing the voice of God calling him in the passage we have before us. But seeing something difficult. A figure with his hand to his forehead weeping over Jerusalem. That's the way he's depicted just to my right.

Sometimes online you see a meme – **how it started and how its going**. And people might post pictures of themselves from years before contrasting them with how things are going now.

In the reading this morning, we've got the how it started picture of Jeremiah.

But out of the corner of my eye, I have the how its going picture.

How it started for Jeremiah?

It started for him as it starts for us all. God formed him and knew him and loved him.

How is it going for Jeremiah as I see him on my right? Life's tough, there's tears, dust, ashes.

“How lonely lies the city that once was full of people!” laments Jeremiah.

“The roads to Zion mourn, for no-one comes to the festivals”

“Is it nothing to you all you who pass by?

“Is any sorrow like my sorrow?”.

What I want to say about Jeremiah this morning is that it might be worth paying him a bit of attention at the moment.

For no-one knew lamentation like Jeremiah.

His prophecy is honest, tetchy and grumpy.

He has harsh words for those who lose the faith and chase after false Gods.

I have a feeling that lots of people prefer the prophecies of Isaiah that we can massage into something Christmassy rather than the predictions of woe that Jeremiah brings us.

But Jeremiah’s lamentations are not in contrast to his early intimacy with God – being known by God in the womb.

It is precisely because he recognises his closeness to God that he is secure enough to give voice to his lamentation. God's intimacy with Jeremiah gives Jeremiah a place to stand and place to say and speak and weep about how bad things are.

I remember coming into the cathedral in the first lockdown nearly two years ago and looking up at him and hearing his words go through my head.

It was so quiet that I could hear the university clock striking the hours from the door of the cathedral. The road was empty. The people were gone.

“How lonely lies the city that once was full of people.”

“The roads to Zion mourn, for no-one comes to the festival”.

Jeremiah looked on the losses of Jerusalem and wept.
And his stained glass eyes looked down on what
wasn't happening here.

And I wept.

Sometimes there's weeping to be done.

And one of the things I fear a bit is that we are so
desperate to get back to normal that we forget to weep
for things that we've lost.

We'll be healthier if we weep for things that are worth
weeping over.

You might want to read a bit of Jeremiah this week.
Or some of the book of Lamentations – texts of
sorrow that are put on Jeremiah's lips by the tradition
we inherit.

Try reaching for Jeremiah and see whether he speaks
to what we have experienced these past two years and
are experiencing yet.

And if you do, remember this.

Jeremiah's words begin with the intimacy of being close to God. Known. Loved. Commissioned.

“Before you were formed in the womb, I knew you,” he hears God say, right at the beginning of his revelation.

Then maybe you will hear in the midst of whatever your sorrow is the same as what Jeremiah heard and proclaimed in the midst of his.

The steadfast Love of the Lord never ceases,
God's mercies never come to an end.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.”

You are known and loved.

Some things are worth weeping over.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases
nonetheless.

Kelvin Holdsworth
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In the reality of our current world, God may surprise us yet.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.