

**“DANGER! CHRISTIANS AT WORK”**

**11 O’Clock Theology**

***Jeremiah 29:1-14***

It’s 11 o’clock – or thereabouts. Here we all are in church, doing what Christians are supposed to do: singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, as Paul tells the Ephesians and Colossians to do; praying together, as we’re told to do wherever we look in the New Testament, it seems; reading the Bible and devoting ourselves to the apostles’ teaching (or at least tolerating what I’ve got to say for the next few minutes); having fellowship with those who are of like mind (and that will continue over coffee, no doubt). It’s what Christians *do* and, as we suggested last week, we look forward to time away from work and our other regular responsibilities in which we can do all these things. And when people miss out on it for any length of time we start to wonder if they’re still “committed”, don’t we?

But what will you be doing at 11 o’clock tomorrow morning? Or Tuesday morning? Or any morning this week? It’s unlikely that you’ll be in a gathering such as this – but you’ll still be a Christian, won’t you? Some of you may know already what you’ll be doing at 11 o’clock tomorrow morning. Some of you may be experiencing the thrill and danger of not knowing! You may be on the ‘phone to a dissatisfied customer. You may be driving to meet a client. You may be planning the next sales project, deciding where cuts have to be made in your organisation, pulling yet another load of washing out of the machine, tidying your child’s bedroom, waiting your turn in the queue at the Health Centre or DSS or Post Office, shopping, having coffee with a neighbour. All kinds of things will be occupying us at this time tomorrow.

What on earth has that got to do with today’s activity? Where’s the Christianity in that? How do we link living in that wider community with the things that we do as a Christian community here in Wade Street Church? Do you ever stop and think about that – or do you just take it for granted that you’re living in two worlds and they never really meet (unless, of course, you invite someone from work or one of your neighbours to come to church with you)? Do you have a theology – a view of God and of your faith in him – that encompasses that? Over the past few weeks we’ve been taking a look at some of these issues, and some of you have very kindly taken filled out a questionnaire about your work. (There are some in the porch for anyone who still wants to participate.) This morning I’d like us to take a look at some of the things we heard about in that reading from *Jeremiah* a few moments ago.

I find this passage wonderfully liberating. I grew up, as some of you will know, in a Christian environment, and for that I am extremely grateful. But the particular brand of Christianity espoused by the church my family went to was of a fairly narrow kind. It considered most things and most people beyond its limited orbit as unsuitable for any contact with the holy few who kept the faith within its walls. Of course, they were valid targets for evangelism, just so long as the communication was only one way. Following the stirring (but, I think, misguided, call) of Martin Lloyd-Jones in the early 60s to “*come out and be separate from them*”, we would not even have anything much to do with other churches. Life revolved around our church – Sunday services, youth club, Bible studies, prayer meetings, special events – and the tainted fleshpots of the cinema, theatre, pub, restaurants and so on were to be avoided at all costs. The culture in which we were living was something that had to be tolerated only insofar as we were travelling through it on our way to glory. Now, I know that’s a caricature in many ways, but I’m sure there are others of you here this morning who have had similar kinds of experience. Go to church, but don’t get too involved in anything much beyond.

Well, God’s people in the late seventh century and early sixth century BC were in a similar position. Most of them had been deported from their homeland and taken off to live in exile in Babylon. At home they had been people with a strong sense of religious and social community. Yes, they’d treated their religion in a very formal and ritualistic way, and, while keeping to its framework, had turned their attention to all kinds of other dubious and downright disobedient practices. But they knew who they were

and they found their identity and their solidarity in their socio-religious culture. The invasion of the Babylonians and their subsequent deportation had brought them up with a bit of a start and they were now realising that their allegiance to the One True God was pretty important.

However, Babylon was a very, very different situation. The culture was different. The expectations were different. They were worried about losing their identity. They wanted to take seriously the worship of their God, to re-commit themselves to their patterns of sacrifice and prayer. They hoped to keep themselves to themselves and so keep their faith alive until they were able to get back home to where they belonged. They were going to stick to their ghettos and live as a small and very distinct group of aliens in the cosmopolitan and, for them, godless culture of the Babylonians.

We may not put it quite like that, but in many ways that's what we tend to think like – at least, that's the temptation. Here we are, God's people in an alien culture. We have a home to go to – a home in glory. *"This world is not my home: I'm just a-passing through"*, as the old song puts it. Until we get there – until we die or Jesus returns – then we'll just have to make the best of a bad job, encouraging one another in our beleaguered little ghettos and keeping ourselves unspotted by the world. Again, as we said last week, many of us see our daily work is something to get over with as quick as possible so that we can get on with the proper Christian business of worshipping God and shouting evangelistic slogans at the great unwashed beyond our doors – and hoping it won't be much longer before we get to heaven, our true home.

But God spoke to his prophet Jeremiah, who was still in Jerusalem with a few of those who had managed to remain at home when the others were deported. And he told him to write a letter to the leaders of the exiled community over in Babylon. We read part of the text of that letter this morning. And the news is not all good news. It's going to be about seventy years before they return to their homes – more than a generation. Their own pet prophets have been trying to encourage them by saying that they'll be home for Christmas (or whatever the equivalent was) without really listening to God (vv8,9), but most of the people who read this letter won't be going home at all. It doesn't mean that God's forgotten them – in fact, he tells them in v11 that he has a lot of good things in store for them. But in the mean time, the message is for them to get involved. "Don't cut yourself off from the city you're in," he tells them. "Don't simply pray that they'll all go to hell because they don't believe in God. Pray for their prosperity – and make sure you contribute to and benefit from that prosperity." They are to keep living as God's people, but within the society of which they are now forcibly and reluctantly a part.

***"Build houses and settle down"***, they are told. They are to plant gardens – you don't do that if you're only expecting to be there a couple of years. This isn't part of some temporary, nomadic way of life. They didn't plant gardens for the nice flowers that they'd brought already started off from the garden centre, but for food – vines, vegetables, olive trees – and they take time to grow and establish themselves and bear fruit. They are to get on and start families, because if they wait until they get back to Jerusalem they may find they're a bit past it.

The message is – and notice that Jeremiah hasn't yet mentioned the seventy years: that comes a few sentences later – that they're in it for the long haul. They really have no alternative but to get involved. They can't opt out into their little ghettos and try to keep separate. They need to make the most of life – and it's where God wants them to be at the moment. They have the opportunity to take God into this culture, to make their mark on this society – as folk like Daniel and Nehemiah were able to do in their foreign cultures.

We need to recognise that, too. We are in it for the long haul. It would be great if, as soon as we became a Christian, or as soon as we were baptised, God took us off to our eternal home. I long for that, for a time when I'll be, as Martin Luther King Jr put it, *"free at last"*. But that could be quite some way into the future yet. In the mean time, we have to live in this "alien" culture, amongst people and institutions that may not be very sympathetic to our worldview. Get used to that idea. It doesn't mean get used to

adopting the ideas of those around, but get used to the idea that you can't just opt out of it all. You need to "*plant your garden*", to provide for yourself and your family, to play your part as a member of society.

**"Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you."** These people are there because God has taken them there: they are where he wants them to be at this moment. OK, in seventy years time they'll be somewhere else, but for now they are in just the right place. And they are there not to sit on the sidelines and criticise everything that goes on, writing angry letters to the *Babylon Mercury* about the parlous state of morality in the city, the number of rowdy youngsters on the streets, the need for stricter sentencing. They are there to "*seek the peace and prosperity of the city*", actively to engage with what's going on. This letter gives God's people permission – more than that, commands them – to involve themselves in the structures of the culture around them.

I have no doubt that the plan of God as revealed in the Bible and as demonstrated throughout history is the redemption of humanity from the oppression of sin. God wants all people to come to a knowledge of him, to accept the free gift of salvation that is offered through Jesus Christ, to have the hope of an eternal future with him in heaven. That's one of the non-negotiables of my faith. But in the mean time he wants all men and women to benefit from the good ordering of society here and now, to be able to enjoy living in an environment that emerges from the chaos of selfishness, greed and inhumanity that so often characterises human society in a fallen world. That's why we're so often commanded to pray for our leaders and to do all that we can to obey them when they are following God's will. It's why Christians have an obligation to work not just for the salvation of their neighbours but also for justice and righteousness in society.

And if we truly believe that God shows us how to make the best of this world through following his words in the Bible, then who better to try and get involved in participating in that world. You'll never make as much difference standing on the sideline and shouting as you will getting your kit on and playing in the match. God wants humanity to live in peace, and if we can contribute to the good ordering of society through our input at work and in other areas, then we need to do so, and to recognise that God has placed us there, that he has "*carried us into exile*" for just that purpose. And mention of praying for our leaders just then take us into the next part of this letter.

**"Pray to the LORD for it."** They are there for the next seventy years. It's to become their home, so they are to pray for it, for everyone who is a part of it. If the city where they are in exile prospers, they will feel the benefit, too. They may have retorted that they didn't feel it right to pray for these pagan people, except, of course, that they might see the light and turn to God, but it's very clear that this is not just prayer for revival, it's prayer for the good ordering of society again.

Some of us like to pray for this world of ours, don't we? For UCB, for those who are called as evangelists, for schools workers, for those who write Christian books, for church leaders, for missionaries – they all get honourable mentions. And rightly so – all those people need our prayers and our support as they grapple with the issues and problems that their calling throws up. But how many of us pray for Christian broadcasters working in the mainstream media, for actors and journalists and writers and producers? They need God's help every bit as much as those who work in Christian niche broadcasting. How often do you pray for the teachers in this congregation, your own children's teachers? How often do you pray for your civic leaders, your political leaders, your boss at work? How often do we pray for those who are out at work each day, struggling with all kinds of ethical, legislative, moral and social dilemmas? How often do you pray for your own workplace – not just for opportunities for witness, but for right decisions, just policies, righteous action plans?

God has called you to live in this place – in Lichfield, or its environs. You should be getting to know what needs praying for. Read the local papers and pray about the rowdiness on a Friday night, the decisions about the local hospital, the rise in burglaries in some of the outlying villages, the decisions of the planners about future development. God has placed you in your workplace for a reason – pray for it,

for your colleagues, your co-workers, your employers and employees. If we – and all the people of Lichfield – took this seriously, I'm sure we'd start to see a real difference. I'd love to see revival here in this city, wouldn't you? But I also want to see it as a place of righteousness and justice, a place of equity and opportunity. And the two things are inextricably linked.

***“Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you,”*** is the final bit of advice Jeremiah is told to offer in the first part of this letter. As we've said already, there were people in the exiled community who were looked up to as the gurus, the prophets, the respected clerics. But they were very sensitive about their relationship with the people. They liked to be popular and well-loved, so they told the people what they thought the people wanted to hear. They told them not to worry because they wouldn't be there for long, so they should stick together and preserve their identity and not go getting involved in what was going on around them. It was much easier, much safer, much cosier to think that. “Don't listen to them,” says Jeremiah. “Have a bit of discernment. Keep a critical eye on them.”

And, again as we said last week, we need to keep a discerning eye on what we are told. Don't swallow everything uncritically and thoughtlessly – even the stuff you hear from pulpits. You may hear things that are uncomfortable, that mean a change in attitude, a change of perspective. God's people have always been warned about hearing what they want to hear and accepting it without thinking. From the days of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, through the time of King Saul in the Old Testament, the prophets who cried “Peace, peace” when there was no peace, to the time of Paul and Timothy (2 *Timothy* 4:3), there has been the danger of being swayed by those who say comforting things.

It goes without saying, almost, that we are to be similarly careful about what we accept from the culture around us. There are good things we can take on board from our wider community, but we must always be prepared for the *“renewing of our minds”*, for a desire to think in a Christian way, for a change in our attitudes. Get involved in what's going on around, but don't forget the distinctive of the Christian faith. Hold to those within the context of your neighbourhood, your workplace.

So where does this leave us, then? Well, if there is one thing that seems to have rung out in every one of these sermons over the past few weeks and which is clearly evident here again this morning, it is that God has put you where you are for a purpose. In your workplace, you are there because God wants you there – and he wants you there now. You may not be called to stay there for ever, you may find it tough going, you may be grappling with all sorts of difficulties, but God has a purpose in your being there. You're here at 11 o'clock this morning, but tomorrow you'll be somewhere completely different – and that's where you can make a difference for him.

As God's people, we are not called to opt out of society and culture; we are not called to the ghetto life. In your workplace you are making a difference – you may not always recognise that, but you are in some way (small or large) helping your workplace to be a better place. You have the opportunity to live for Jesus there. You can pray for that place, for those amongst whom you work, far better than anyone else can. And what's more, you can have the help and support of other Christians in that task – either through the church here or through your workplace contacts (or both).

Get involved – carefully and prayerfully – in this wonderful world that God has made. It's a privilege to be involved. It's a calling. We have the opportunity to make this world a better place as we demonstrate the values and ethics of the Kingdom of God. Let's be whole life missionaries to our community.