

# That dreadful sinking feeling

## Jeremiah 38:4-6; 8-10

This evening, my title “That Dreadful Sinking Feeling” defines an experience I suspect all of us will share at some time in our lives. For example: We may have done something stupid and we know it. We may be waiting for some results and the outcome is disappointing. We forget something that we believe to be important. We let someone down – or someone lets us down.

The prophet Jeremiah had a dreadful sinking feeling brought about by his own people rebelling against God. It was made all the more painful by the fact that he felt helpless; unable to do anything to stop the situation getting worse.

Jeremiah’s experience of speaking God’s word resulted in him becoming a prisoner in the court of the guard. Being imprisoned did not stop him conversing with soldiers and the people of the city. He seems to have been overheard by the princes and this causes a strong reaction.

Before we look in detail at Jeremiah 38, let us remind ourselves of some important information about Jeremiah’s calling and character.

Jeremiah was told by God that he was set apart for his life’s work, even before his birth (1:4 and 5). He resists God’s call on the grounds that he is too young to be a prophet (1:6), but God overrules his objections. There is a real sense of intimacy about Jeremiah’s call (1:9). His calling is certainly unique when compared to the call of other prophets.

His message could be perceived as having destructive content within it, as shown in Jeremiah 1:10. The Book of Jeremiah indicates that much of his preaching had to be negative, even though it eventually led to something extremely positive.

With so much that could be understood as destructive, Jeremiah is warned that he must expect opposition, but he received the assurance that God would be with him (1:18-19).

We read Jeremiah’s account through the eyes of those who were followers of Jesus Christ and we ask what it has to say to us today. So Jeremiah had a strong message which certainly contains destructive elements which, in turn, would open up into a much more constructive message.

What, then, did he have to say that would get him into bother? He denounced social evils such as oppression of the poor (2:34). He denounced the perversion of justice in the courts and throughout the society of the day (5:28). He pointed to the shedding of innocent blood (7:6). He foretold disaster upon the nation.

Jeremiah was a prophet in the particular setting of his own day and amongst his own people, at a time of great turmoil, which would culminate in the fall of Jerusalem. He came from a rural area

and was a sensitive man. Because of the Book of Jeremiah, he has been described as a “weeping prophet”.

The prophecy is quite intense and Jeremiah frequently acts out his message, as well as being caught up in some quite dramatic incidents.

Jeremiah is arrested and is openly accused of treason. He is lowered into a pit or cistern, which was not filled with water as it might be sometimes. He is lowered into mud and he must have felt desolate and abandoned in this experience.

Jeremiah had a strong sense of call, but is often positioned “between a rock and a hard place”. There was an insistent sense of call from God and the resistance of the people of power, against which his message had to be delivered.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, it is good for us to consider this passage in Jeremiah 38 and ask some pertinent questions:

### **Can we identify with the prophet in the pit?**

We will not fully appreciate the words of the prophet until we consider what has brought him to this point. It is worth noting that Jeremiah’s opposition had followed him through his life: In his own town of Anathoth and amongst his own family, particularly his brothers (12:6) He is put in the stocks by one of the priests (20:1-2) Priests and prophets unite against him (26:7-9).

There is one powerful message that cannot be ignored –that an authentic speaking of God’s word will often generate opposition and ridicule. When the city of Jerusalem was laid siege by the Babylonians, Jeremiah’s enemies wanted to silence his troubling voice.

Jeremiah was called to preach God’s purposes and yet, in doing so, he would be required to challenge the false prophets of the day.

Many people have had to confront what they believe to be wrong, or question people’s motives, and the prophets were good examples. However, the very act can cause deep resentment and many have suffered for doing this.

Justin Martyr concluded, “You can kill us, but not hurt us.”

Bill Bray from Cornwall also indicated his bravery in facing whatever lay ahead, when he said, “Lord, if any have to die this day, let it be me, for I am ready.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, speaking at a time of huge challenge for the world, said: “God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us. Only the suffering God can help.”

What may this pit mean for you or me? We don't have to define it too closely, but it may be rejecting what we have to do in response to the love of God.

The mud of the cistern is a powerful message. Clearly, the absence of water can be due to the season of the year; the lack of water would mean he would not die immediately by drowning, but he was in fact condemned to a slow death in wet mud.

But if we take the pit as an analogy, what might be the areas in which the pit or its equivalent might occur: The pit of rejection by others The pit of refusal of recognition The pit of ridicule.

There are many ways in which a person may undergo suffering because of doing what is right.

One sister of the church told of her experience in difficult times and how she was made aware of the presence of God, even when she was up against the most challenging situations. She wrote, "I no longer believe that God is only within me, and I do not believe that God is only out there in history. I think we are actually in God at all times." I would want to add to that thought by saying that God is "with us" at all times.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, in another context, wrote, "God is not far from us. Rather he awaits us every instance of our action, in the work of the moment. There is a sense in which he is at the tip of my pen, my speech, my brush and my needle."

In the muddy pit, Jeremiah was as near to God as at any other time. This is not a prophet in a pulpit, but a prophet in a prison and a pit and yet he makes this difficult situation a place where he demonstrates and declares the presence of God. Jeremiah's preparation for prison had been over twenty years and so he would not be surprised at the various outcomes that would be his.

In his momentous book *Journey for a Soul*, George Appleton concluded in relation to suffering: "When trouble hits us we can react to it in a variety of ways. We can let it knock us out, so that we lose all hope and stamina. We can rebel and refuse to accept the rightness or merit of it. We can fill our lives with feverish activity so that we have no time to think about it. Or we can accept it – without defeat, rebellion or evasion – trusting that God will make clear tomorrow what is so difficult to understand today."

The prison walls which held Jeremiah captive in the pit would not exclude the presence of the Lord – nor his voice of liberating truth in such difficult circumstances.

### **Where is hope to be found in that difficult place?**

In the mud, Jeremiah was still able to be aware of God's presence. Thankfully his earlier ministry and witness had impacted upon others.

In all our lives, sooner or later, some measure of suffering comes. It may be a consequence of our own mistakes or ignorance, but in almost every life there is that which is hard to understand. The

experience of Jeremiah was not unique and, running through the Christian faith, is a thread of truth which may not necessarily understand everything, but certainly is able to turn situations into something richer and better.

Henri Nouwen in his great book *The Wounded Healer* interpreted healing not just in an individual sense, but in terms of the people of God: "A Christian community is therefore a healing community not because wounds are cured and pains alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision. Mutual confession then becomes a mutual deepening of hope, and sharing weakness becomes a reminder to one and all of the coming strength."

Chapter 38 of Jeremiah is understood by some commentators to recount the final threat to Jeremiah's life. His lowering by the princes into the pit would not only expose him to the potential of drowning, a low risk in this particular situation, but also the reality of starving in such conditions.

As we read the narrative both before and after the account, we realise that Jeremiah was clearly a difficulty to Zedekiah the king. Jeremiah makes two requests of Zedekiah: - That he not be put to death That he would listen to the prophet's counsel.

Zedekiah promises to honour the first and, therefore, his life is saved – but he is unlikely to respond positively to the second. The king had reportedly sent repeatedly for the prophet to give him a word from God (21:2) and to pray for deliverance (37:3). He wanted "cheap grace" – offering little in return.

Neither royal menace nor royal clemency is likely to sway the prophet from his calling.

How often are we like the king in wanting something easy?

### **What does it have to say to us?**

The request of the king typifies that aspect of human nature which desires something that is smooth and easy. With very little by way of repentance With no resulting amendment to life No heartfelt trust or faithful obedience A new life without the death of the old In effect, resurrection without crucifixion.

Jeremiah knew all too well that life could not be lived like this. The cruel treatment of Jeremiah was to a person whose only crime was to love his people to the point of dedication with cost.

Psalm 69 has been described as one of the great Messianic songs and it picks up the theme of the miry pit (Psalm 69:2, 15 and 20).

This strong passage shows Jeremiah being thrown into a real pit, which in this case is a cistern. This is interesting because Jeremiah has spoken about broken cisterns earlier in Chapter 2, verse 13.

What happened to Jeremiah reminds all of us that: There can be consequences of what we say – and no-one is exempt. Too often, like the officials involved, there is an attempt to clear their own responsibility – in this case the prophet is seen as responsible. Help for the prophet comes from an unexpected source. Ebed-Melech was a “Cushite, an official in the royal palace” (v.7). He was frequently in contact with the king and was able to use his influence to gain Jeremiah’s freedom. It was a surprising intervention.

This was considered to be not too dissimilar to the one Paul offered to Timothy at the end of his two letters: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to the heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (2 Timothy 4:18)

It was George Bernard Shaw who said, “During their lifetime saints are a nuisance.” This cynical comment has more than a ring of truth about it and Jeremiah certainly fitted into that category.

Jeremiah was a nuisance to his contemporaries. A siege mentality definitely existed, as the prophet made it quite clear: “... if you stay in the city you will die but if you go over to the Babylonians you will live.” (v.2)

Whilst many ordinary people listened to what John Guest called Jeremiah’s “persuasive logic” – those in power felt greatly threatened.

Thomas à Kempis made a clear link between this theme and the ministry of Jesus Christ and those who follow him: “Jesus has many who love his kingdom in heaven, but few who bear his cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share his feast, but few his fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, but few are willing to suffer for his sake.”

Whilst this is true, we are equipped to face the most difficult of circumstances. This led C S Lewis to write: “God, who foresaw your tribulation, has specially armed you to go through it, not without pain, but without stain.”

Jeremiah could be described as the first prison author. The last account has not yet been written, but the lesson from Jeremiah can be an inspiration to Christian people in every age. At the close of the Beatitudes, we read of how people who are persecuted may know the blessing of God: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way that they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:11-12)

When you or I have that dreadful sinking feeling, whatever the cause or reason, we can find inspiration from Jeremiah, who did not hold back from doing what he believed to be right and found that God was able to rescue him from that place.