

**Sermon: 2019/02/03 (4th Sunday after Epiphany, Year C), Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; and, Luke 4:21-30
_BTR**

[Invite children to the front.]

Last week I told you about a Jewish leader called, "Nehemiah."

Well, today we hear about an earlier prophet whose name rhymes with that:

Jeremiah.

Jeremiah - like Isaiah - also lived at the time when Israel was being attacked and destroyed by the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

And God chose him to warn his friends and countrymen about the coming trouble.

But this was a surprise to Jeremiah because, as he admitted, "I am only a boy"

That's right!

God chose *a child* - like you - to speak for Him! *Lord* of the universe!

Can you imagine, that?

God chose *a child* to speak words of *criticism* to kings and queens;
to teachers and to soldiers.

And, naturally, Jeremiah was very scared:

When God first speaks to him, we hear the prophet say: "Ah!" - which is a very versatile word!

It can mean lots of different things.

So, imagine that you are Jeremiah.

What "Ah"! do you think this was?

Was it "AHHHHHH!"?

Or something else?

Go on.

Let's hear:

[Wait for response.]

Jeremiah was nervous.

Not only would these important adults probably not listen to him, they might get angry and punish him and spank his bottom!

(And, actually, they did throw him into prison.)

But God assured Jeremiah that the truth is *powerful*; that the truth has an incredible, transformative power *irrespective* of who speaks it:

telling the truth is like a mighty weapon, stronger than swords or guns.

It can change the world.

Which is why God said to Jeremiah: "I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." - this is the mysterious "magic" of telling the truth.

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

I mentioned last week that, when we look closely at the Bible *in its entirety*, we seem to find that "Grace" and "The Law" have been locked in a perpetual dance throughout God's relationship with humanity; and, in different seasons, one seems to have the upper hand - to lead the "waltz" - and then the other; that one is at the forefront for a period and then the other. (Theologians call these "seasons," "Dispensations.")

Close your eyes and picture that.

Perhaps two skaters on the ice - the ice which is the canvas of history, the stage of reality.

Both wear garish, risqué, heavily sequinned, skin-coloured leotards - the man and his partner.

Their hair rigid with hairspray, silver glitter all over their faces; the crowd transfixed; the music sweeping, ebbing and flowing.

They spin around, leap and twirl with such grace that they almost seem like the same, singular creature - a beautiful, elegant monster of four arms and four legs. And they stand and glide at the very centre of a chaos of frozen crystals sprayed from the blades on their feet.

And then, *suddenly(!)*, as the tune reaches its final crescendo - a clash, perhaps, of cymbals or with the jarring clang of an immense gong, the couple, perfectly in step with the melody's movements, stop: he's upright, exhausted, his chin up, his eyes on the sky; but she leans right back, bent at the waist, her face upside down toward the judges, *looking* for the score, *seeking* their approval.

She is now the focus.

He is the one pushing her forward, whilst supporting them both as the upright on a suspension bridge.

And her prominence represents the new covenant - the climax of a long sequence, which comes through in Paul's letter to the Corinthians this morning: *once* we knew only in part he writes, *once* we saw only 'in a mirror, dimly', but *now* there's an unexpected beginning - a beginning that the Jews didn't fully foresee - though a number of prophets predicted it! - a beginning at an end.

And all this is encapsulated; is expressed - for those who have eyes to see - in the moment that Jesus read from the scroll of *Isaiah*.

His selective quotation.

His arrival from the wilderness having been baptised and tempted.

When you put these pieces of the puzzle together, the meaning becomes clear. But for the onlookers who were present, like a person walking into a movie-theatre half way through a presentation, the significance of Christ's pronouncement - Has gesture - is lost, which is why their reaction of "amazement" turns so quickly into a murderous 'rage'.

It was *not*, you see, the amazement of awe; of wonderment; of feeling captivated - as the audience witnessing the ice-dancers, it was, rather, the amazement of *shock*, of *surprise*, of "O. M. G., I can't believe He just said that." ...

A family favourite when I was growing up was *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey*.

Do you know it?

It stars a very young Keanu Reeves - long before *Matrix* fame.

Well, these two lovable stoners - wannabe rockstars - "Bill" and "Ted" - meet a man, "Rufus," who travels through time and space in a phone-box (which is pretty obviously plagiarised from that British T.V. show, *Doctor Who*); and he tells them that *their* music, which is dreadful, is destined to bring about World Peace.

And hearing this, they exclaim, in perfect chorus, "No Way!"

It is a cry of disbelief.

Of incredulity.

And, in Nazareth, it devolves immediately into outrage:

"Is not this Joseph's son?!"

How dare He suggest that what was familiar and cherished was now receding, to make way for a new era, in which their traditions - their *elitist* traditions of circumcision and tribalism and animal sacrifice and so on - would be turned on its head: by the admission of Gentiles into the blessed family of God.

And this is hinted at by the reminder that Jesus offers them of how God had given 'Naaman *the Syrian*' good health at a time of widespread leprosy among the *Israel*-ites.

That outcome - evidencing that God might, after all, have a *deep*, compassionate, fatherly love for nations other than just their own - is *sooo(!)* unthinkable to those in the synagogue, they can't even entertain the possibility of it; they miss the clue even as it is presented to them:

The full extent of God's promises to Abraham is still hidden from them by what they were *accustomed* to think; its truth was obscured by their *habits* of thought. But they *do* glean that something truly revolutionary is afoot, and they instinctively react against it:

They grab hold of the Savior - or at least they must have done so:

Luke doesn't say exactly what happened, but he says the crowd 'drove' Jesus to the top of a tall, precipitous cliff.

And that term - "drove" - doesn't suggest gentleness or civility.

This is a mob doing what mobs do:

Swept along by "groupthink," being aggressive, violent, *vicious*.

This is, *essentially*, a lynching.

But their victim - the "Lamb of God" - isn't taken to a tree - like some poor black scapegoat - but to a high place from which He can be thrown.

And then what happened?

We hear this simple, innocuous phrase: '[H]e passed through the midst of them'.

This, to my mind, is the first of Jesus' miracles - in *Luke*, that is.

That is to say, it is the first miracle that *He* performs.

The incarnation in Mary's womb was miraculous, of course.

But it was God *the Father's* doing.

And in the desert with the Devil, *the Devil* transports Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, in a clear display of supernatural power.

But here, at the clifftop, Christ is able to just slip away - there's no scuffle or "breaking loose" or anything of the kind.

One minute He's *entirely* at their mercy standing on a ledge, looking down, I guess, at some hard, cruel rocks; then, the next He's walking 'on His way'.

Was this a miracle of becoming, momentarily, intangible?

- Of "phasing" - like the DC hero, the Flash - through solid matter; of the many tight fists clutching His robe, suddenly, *presumably*, finding themselves grasping only air?

Did they wave their arms around in frustration like drunk men attempting to swat at flies as He simply *drifted* through them, ghost-like?

Or was this a miracle of dazzling them with bright lights - as if with a camera flash, allowing Jesus to escape their custody as they squinted and blinked?

However He did it, Jesus demonstrated - if only subtly - that, as God, He had plans and intentions that wouldn't be thwarted; that He was going to ensure, *personally*, that whatever ugliness and stupidity men and women throw at one another, the creator Himself would do what it takes so that, in the end, goodness, kindness and tenderness would triumph over more brutish, bullying alternatives.

Let's take a moment to reflect.