

# In the Meantime

*A sermon on Jeremiah 31: 27-34; 2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5 & Luke 18: 1-8 by Nathan Nettleton, 16 October 2022*

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## Message

God has promised a time of resurrection and renewal, and has given us guidance for living faithfully in the meantime.

## Sermon

We increasingly know what it is like to be torn down and to wonder whether we have any future. The pandemic we've been living with for more than two and a half years has been tearing down much of life as we have known it. Our news is dominated by the biggest war in Europe since the Second World War, and here in Australia in recent months we have had wave after wave of devastating climate-change related floods. On and on it goes, tearing at our sense of hope for the future.

The prophet Jeremiah, in the reading we heard earlier, speaks of a community being plucked up and torn down, overthrown and destroyed. We know that feeling, that experience. Jeremiah mentions a saying that was often quoted in his day: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." I think we know that feeling too. We are coping the consequences of actions or neglect that we had little or no responsibility for.

Of course many of us know that feeling at a personal level too, even more literally. Most of us have wrestled to a greater or lesser extent with things in our own emotional make-up, in our attitudes, reactions and behaviours, that are the unchosen consequences of the ways our parents related to us, and perhaps the ways their parents had related to them. "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

Around the world we see it on a global scale too. Children grow up in worlds torn apart by the violence and hostility of their parents and their parents' parents to the umpteenth generation. So many of the deadly conflicts tearing apart our world are fuelled by resentments and cycles of revenge that go back generations, and in some cases, hundreds of years.

The things that most of us are feeling assailed by at present aren't so bound up in that sort of multi-generational violent history, although when we talk to Uncle Den and other indigenous brothers and sisters we're reminded that that too is just a form of privileged denial, but the feeling of being plucked up and torn down, overthrown and destroyed, is nevertheless widespread, painful and lingering. After two and a half years of the pandemic, I don't think many of us are still feeling the stabbing dread of the initial shock. I think most of us have moved on somewhat in the sense that that trauma is no longer the thing that dominates every thought and feeling of the day. But there are still consequences that set our teeth on edge, aren't there?

We still wince when an unmasked stranger coughs near us in a crowd. We still feel a stabbing anxiety when covid isolation rules are relaxed and it feels like the world is in denial and just prioritising economics over our health and safety. And then the rising flood waters come lapping at our doors. The SES have already dropped of sandbags at Shelley's place because she is only a few hundred metres from the swelling Wimmera River.

Plucked up and torn down, overthrown and destroyed. We stand alongside our forebears of Jeremiah's day, trying to make a go of it amidst the ruins of Jerusalem. All they had built had been torn down, and all they had believed in and hoped for had been trashed, and though time had dulled the first pain of the trauma, they continued to live with the consequences, the aftermath, day after day after day.

And so it is to them, and to us, that the prophet brings the word of the Lord, "Just as I have watched over you to pluck up and tear down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over you to build and to plant, says the Lord. ... The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah."

Now that is a promise that we could take heart from, but it leaves a lot of questions unanswered, doesn't it? Like when?! It is all very well to promise that "the days are surely coming", but we'd like a bit more detail, wouldn't we? How long have we got to wait?

It makes a difference doesn't it? We know this in all sorts of different situations. If you go to the doctor, and she says, "You've got a virus. Stay in bed. It won't last forever," then the first thing we are going to ask is "How long, roughly? How long does this kind of virus normally run?" Because if you've got to go to bed and wait, you need to have some idea how long you might be waiting for. You need to be able to make plans accordingly, and let people know how long you might be out of action for. "The days are surely coming when you will be well again" doesn't quite deal with the complexities of the situation does it?

Well, we're not getting an answer on that one. The people of Jerusalem weren't, but the day did come. We aren't either, and the day remains a hope for which we watch and pray. And sometimes when you go to the doctor, she can't tell you either. Sometimes the diagnosis is not so specific and they can do nothing more than guess. That's our situation.

And so the question that comes up next in such a situation is "What are we to do in the meantime?" What does faithfulness look like while we wait for the promised new day? Well, the prophet doesn't answer that question in the extract we heard tonight, but I think our other readings give us some good guidelines. Three things stand out, and I think they are all pretty relevant to our situation.

The first comes from the gospel reading. The opening line gives a clear indication of not only what it is but how relevant it is likely to be: "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Clearly this is directed to people who might be in danger of losing heart. And clearly a major contributor to the danger of them losing heart is that what they are hoping for and praying for is not being realised. They have waited and hoped and prayed, but still there is nothing more than "the days are surely coming". The answer: keep praying, says Jesus.

The parable he tells does not give us any of the answers we might be looking for. It speaks only about what to do in the meantime. Pray always. What's the point? Well, even if you were trying to get something out of someone who couldn't care less, persistence and tenacity will usually pay off in the end, so when you are dealing with God who really does want to give you what's best for you, you have even less reason to give up. And part of the point here is

that God's desire to give us what is best for us does not always look much like what we want or what we think is best for us.

In the Jeremiah reading, God does not shirk responsibility for the plucking up and tearing down, the overthrowing and destroying. If we need a period of trudging in the wilderness feeling like our prayers and hopes are being withheld in order to prepare us for the entry into the promised land, we're not likely to realise that about ourselves are we? But God knows what is in store for us and what it is going to take to prepare us. And the one thing that is made clear is that continuing to pray, regardless of whether it seems to be achieving anything, is a crucial part of what we need.

A second thing that is necessary in the meantime is made clear in the reading from the second letter to Timothy. "Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

Do you notice the forward looking emphasis of that? Immersing ourselves in the Bible does things that prepare us and form us and equip us for what is to come, for what lies ahead of us. How? It teaches, it corrects, it trains us in righteousness. How does it do these things? Well, primarily through immersing us in the stories of God's people and writing them into us so they become our stories.

Every community lives by its ancestral stories, the stories that give it its identity and values and ways of being. But as followers of Jesus, we are a people who have transferred from one community to another. Therefore we have not simply imbibed the communal stories with our mother's milk. We have to learn them, to live with them and into them.

We have to put in the time to write these stories into our hearts and minds. Only then can we, for example, recognise ourselves in the people standing in the wreckage of Jerusalem asking how are we to live in the meantime. Only then can we see the relevance of their situation and their answers for our situation and our questions.

Unless we do that, we remain rootless and groundless and we face these situations alone and unprepared and we have to go through the whole process of finding the answers all over again with very little guidance and no inherited wisdom. Continue in what you have learned, and immerse yourselves in our ancestral stories as found in our scriptures.

The third thing we can do in the meantime is also found in Paul's guidance for Timothy: "I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable. Always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully." In other words, just get on with it.

Ministry and discipleship may not seem very fruitful in such times. It might seem that whatever we sow is snatched away by the birds and choked by the weeds and scorched by the sun, but that doesn't mean that we should sit on our bums and wait for a more opportune time. Be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable, says Paul.

We are not called to be effective, we are called to be faithful. We sow, and it is up to God whether anything sprouts or not. We are not responsible for what is God's responsibility. That goes for the whole of our situation in these times. It is not our job to engineer a recovery project, although we might be called on to contribute our bit. Our job is to be faithful; to pray always, to continue in what we have learned, studying and teaching the scriptures, and to carry on in the work and ministries we have been given.

That doesn't mean that we should ignore the problems and pretend nothing is wrong. We need to play our part, arranging sandbags or changing our consumption patterns or reconciling conflicts, but as Uncle Den so faithfully and regularly reminds us, we can't fix it all. We can't fix it all; we just have to do our bit and care for one another.

There was a quote in one of the weekend magazines this morning from a psychotherapist whose parents met as Polish Jews in a World War 2 concentration camp. Reflecting on their experience, she said that "in the camps, people made theatre, people sang, they made music, they drew, they made love in the most dire of circumstances. They didn't wait to come out of there – it's what kept them alive in the first place." (Esther Perel, quoted in "Matters of the Heart" by Kerrie O'Brien, *Sunday Life*, 16 October 2022, p.8)

When will the day of resurrection and renewal come? Who can know. But we have more than enough to do in the meantime.

In the meantime, be faithful, pray always, continue in learning the scriptures, and carry out your work and ministry fully. Sing, dance, draw, make music and theatre, make love, look after one another. For the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will build and plant and make a new covenant with you. And this is the covenant that I will make with you after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within you, and I will write it on your hearts; and I will be your God, and you shall be my people. No longer will anyone need to teach each other, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for you will all know me, from the least of you to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their failings, and remember your sin no more.