

# Why Drink From that Pool?

*A sermon on Jeremiah 2:4-13 & Luke 14:1, 7-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 1 September 2019*

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## Message

Faithfulness to God means sticking to the ways in which Jesus has led us, but we are constantly tempted to idolise his name while avoiding his ways.

## Sermon

Ten days ago the big news of the day was again an appearance of George Cardinal Pell in court, this time to hear the judges dismiss his appeal against his conviction for sexually assaulting two choir boys. We may yet get to see that again if, as expected, he takes his appeal on to the High Court. I'm no fan of George Pell, and I have no reason to doubt the jury's verdict, but I still find it uncomfortable to watch the spectacle of a senior member of the clergy on trial for such horrendous crimes. The thing is that I am also a member of the clergy, and when my lot constantly seem to be in the news for all the wrong reasons, it reflects on all of us. It seems like now any time someone is upset with a pastor, they can use the word "abuse" and the mud will likely stick. Thanks George!

But there are much bigger issues here than just how this reflects on clergy types like me. What we are seeing played out in the courts is the monumental failure of the Christian Church. As we heard tonight, Jesus warned us that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled", and we are certainly seeing that played out, but how did we get from our beginnings, following one who taught us to be a blessing to "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" and to favour their company over that of the rich and powerful; how did we get from there to seeing so-called "princes of the Church" so full of their own wealth and power and entitlement that they can believe themselves to be beyond suspicion and beyond the reach of the law?

Now while that's a big and painful question for clergy types like me, it is also true that questions about failures of discipleship do not stop with the clergy. The question can be asked of all of us, how is it that God has shown us the way of faithfulness, and yet we constantly find ourselves drawn off into other pathways? And that question has been asked for a very long time. We heard it tonight in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, some 600 years before the time of Jesus.

One of the things that is striking about the way that Jeremiah puts the question, especially for us hearing it in the current climate, is that he sets it in a courtroom, in a legal trial. He imagines a courtroom scene where it's not George in the dock, but all of us, and God brings charges against us and sets out the case to prove our unfaithfulness, calling on heaven and earth to stand in judgement against us. Kind of scary, but important to listen to, and perhaps even more so nowadays as we see the church collapsing under the weight of its own unfaithfulness. Can we hear the charges and respond to God's invitation to take a new path of freedom and life?

Let's look briefly at these words in their original form and context, which of course is before Jesus, and then ask how we might be expected to hear them today as followers of Jesus.

Back then, God's complaint began with a question: "What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?" That final phrase could also have been translated as "went after hot air, and became nothing but hot air themselves." What you pursue is what you become.

That is followed by a reference to the exodus from slavery and the journey to the promised land. “You and your ancestors have not remembered what I, the Lord, did for you when I set you free, and you have not looked again to the God who did so much for you.” Or in other words, “We have some solid history of journeying together, so you can’t claim to have been ignorant of what it takes, but you have gone off after other ways anyway.”

Then in a bit that is perhaps most relevant to the likes of Cardinal Pell, God rebukes the leaders of the people saying, “The priests didn’t seek me, those who teach the law didn’t even know me, the governors defied me, and the prophets preached the ways of other gods.”

Finally, there is this powerful metaphor that compares God to a fountain of pure living water, and says that the people have turned their backs on this fountain and preferred to try digging their own waterholes to drink from, even though they are faulty and what little water they hold drains away into the sandy ground.

When it is all laid out in such stark black and white terms by the prophet, it sounds so simple and clear. We hear it and marvel at how stupid these ancient people must have been to keep turning their backs on such an awesome God. But in reality, it is never that simple, is it? Despite the ways the stories often sound, these people’s awareness of God and experience of God was no clearer than ours. God’s presence often seems ambiguous and unclear, and God’s pathways often seem indistinct and difficult to be sure about. They could easily wander way off track without even realising it, just as we can. These words are addressed to us too, all of us.

So how would the prophet express these same ideas today? How would they sound if addressed to 21<sup>st</sup> century followers of Jesus? The biggest change perhaps would be directly about Jesus. I think that rather than referring to the story of the exodus from slavery, the prophet today would refer directly to the story of Jesus.

Why did you not say, “Where is the Lord  
who came to us in Jesus,  
who led us in the ways of love and forgiveness,  
through a land of suspicion and defensiveness,  
through a land of hostility and vengefulness,  
a land that no one passes through unscathed,  
where compassion is nailed to a post?”  
I brought you through the deep waters of baptism  
into a new world of grace and generosity.  
But when you entered you defiled my love,  
claiming it as a promise for yourselves  
but refusing to share it with any but your own kind.

Now I need to sound a quick warning here. I am, as the Bible does, paralleling the story of Jesus with the story of the Exodus, but it is important to be aware of how badly this is sometimes done and how it contributes to exactly the losing-our-way that we are talking about here. Too often the Jesus story is stripped of all its content, of all the things that Jesus actually did and taught, and instead it gets caught up in an overdoing of this court room image, and is presented as nothing more than a big legal transaction between humanity and God. The story becomes fixated on Jesus’s death as our Exodus moment, as though the way he lived and the things he taught were of no particular consequence to the story. And when we do that, it is no wonder we get lost, because the gospel becomes about a single moment, a moment of decision

and change, but once that moment is past we have no more idea how to live faithfully in the new land than the ancient Hebrews did.

That moment is important, but it is not the be all and end all. It is the moment of stepping onto the new path, the way of salvation, the way that is lived in the shape of Jesus, the way that is followed by watching what Jesus does, and doing likewise. I know that some will object to that, saying that I am reducing Jesus to little more than a moral teacher, than a good example. But that is to completely misunderstand the way of salvation. It comes from thinking of salvation just as a courtroom outcome, just as a ticket out of this world and into the next, instead of recognising that Jesus set out to save the whole world, and to save us in this world from what has gone wrong and is tearing this world apart now. Salvation takes place in the here and now, not only after you die.

What Jesus lived and taught is the life that will save the world, the life that is salvation. In a world of tribalism, hostility and vengefulness, Jesus modelled a life that refused to buy into the hatred, a life of absorbing hostility in his own body and returning only generous love and mercy. We know what that looks like in Jesus. We recognise an innocent man being executed and praying for the forgiveness of his torturers. We marvel at how, even as the resurrected victim, he doesn't come back swearing to make his murderers pay, but reaching out to them with the wounded hands of undiminished love and welcome.

We recognise it and marvel at it, but we find it an awful lot harder to follow it, to actually be Jesusy in our own living and relating. We name the name of Jesus and speak of him as the Lord and Saviour whom we follow, but again and again we head off down other pathways. We get all tribal and defensive and fearful and begin demanding that governments legislate religious freedoms to protect us against perceived threats from those who reject our beliefs. Funnily enough, we never heard Jesus protesting about the violation of his religious freedoms when his far more real enemies were having him killed. But we find it so hard to be genuinely Jesusy.

I know I do personally. I know I get caught up in the kind of behaviour Jesus was pointing to in our gospel reading tonight, comparing myself to others and angling to get myself recognised and honoured by others, wondering how I can position myself to be seen as an achiever, as an influencer, as a success, as more significant than others.

The time when it is most obvious that I have parted company with Jesus and gone my own way is when I catch myself clinging to resentments and wanting to see others made to pay for what they've done, especially if what they've done impacted on me or my loved ones. I can admire Jesus praying for forgiveness for his torturers, but I find it very hard to follow him down that path. I saw this in myself as recently as last night.

I was at the Aretha Franklin Tribute concert performed by the Melbourne Massed Gospel Choir that Margie sings in, and I found it quite distracting that in the front row of the choir was a man who was a key member of the Whitley College Council when they decided to close down its residential college ministry and refused to explain their reasons. I still carry a lot of hurt from that episode, and it affected my wife far more because she was the head of that ministry. On retreat in January, I found God challenging me about this while I was walking a prayer labyrinth. I had to stop and wrestle with the call to let it go. But when I did and I moved on, ten minutes later it came up again and I had to wrestle with it again. I think God was reminding me that I will have to deal with this every time it sticks its head up. It won't be all over in one

session. The healing is ongoing. And I'm sorry, but once again I did not find myself praying for God's forgiveness and blessings on that man in the front row last night.

I understand that the significance of my inability to follow Jesus down that track is not so much about my personal sin and need for forgiveness and transformation. Its significance is not so much as some kind of black mark against my name in God's big book. Its significance is that as long as I am clinging to such resentments and lusting after retaliation or "justice" in the shape of vengeance, I am actually contributing to the culture of hostility and resentment and vengefulness that is tearing apart our planet. As long as we as a culture keep dividing ourselves into opposing tribes and pointing angry fingers at one another, we will continue to hurtle down a path of self-destruction. Jesus has modelled the way out, but we've written it off as too hard and not in our own interests. And each time I turn away from his path, I too am actually fostering the toxic culture that Jesus came to save us from. I am part of the problem, not part of the solution.

So I need to hear again the prophet's message:

When you were under pressure and looking for your way,  
why did you not say, "Where is the Lord  
who came to us in Jesus,  
who led us in the ways of love and forgiveness,  
through a land of suspicion and defensiveness,  
through a land of hostility and vengefulness?  
Why did you forsake me, the fountain of living water,  
and turn away to drink instead  
from your own fetid pools of bitterness and resentment?"

And if indeed it was a courtroom trial, I would stand condemned. But as much as that is true, I also need to hear the words of Jesus:

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,  
but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:17)

What Jesus wants to remind us, over and over, is that this courtroom scene in the imagination of the prophet is a useful rhetorical device, but it is not intended to shape our image and understanding of God. God is not a stern and fearsome judge looking for reasons to pass harsh sentence on us. Yes, when I ask how Jesusy my attitudes and behaviour are, I may well feel my conscience condemning me, but God is not condemning me.

God may well be weeping over me. God may be distressed and frustrated over my inability to live up to the grace I preach. But God did not send the Son into the world to condemn me or any of us. God sent the Son into the world that we might know ourselves beloved by God, that we might find ourselves enfolded in love and mercy, and in that, be set free. Free to keep picking ourselves up and setting our feet again on the pathway that Jesus has led us in, the pathway where all desires for vengeance are overcome by grace, where all desires for privilege are overcome by love for others, where all desires for power over others are overcome by gratuitous love, and where all that divides us is dissolved in the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.