

CALLING: JEREMIAH

(Jeremiah 1.1-10, Luke 9.57-62)

Introduction

Shortly before my selection conference for ordained ministry in the Church of England I was given a brief pep talk with Bishop Henry Scriven. I had actually done quite a lot in Christian leadership before that point, but Bishop Henry cautioned against even mentioning it.

"They're not interested in your triumphs and achievements," he said. "They just want to hear how unworthy you feel and that you know you are being *called*."

Last week, we saw how God called Gideon. Next week, we'll see how he called Paul. Today it's Jeremiah. All three were reluctant. And all three had a difficult time of it – but none more so than Jeremiah. All three were highly unlikely candidates to be used by God.

It's been said before, but Jacob was a cheat, James and John had a temper, Miriam was a gossip, Martha was a worrier, Paul was a fanatic, Gideon was insecure, Noah got drunk, Jonah ran away from God, David was an adulterer and murderer, Thomas was a doubter, Elijah was depressive, Moses stuttered badly, Zacchaeus was short and Lazarus was dead.

God works with some pretty unpromising raw material sometimes. If ever you needed proof that God doesn't wait 'till you're all sorted before calling you - there it is.

Jeremiah had no training and no experience. He would have probably been in his late teens or early twenties.

Background

The first three verses place Jeremiah's call in a particular time and location.

After King Solomon died, about 350 years earlier, two men staked rival claims for the throne and it led to a civil war. In the end, the nation split in two. 10 of the 12 tribes

to the north kept the name "Israel." The two remaining tribes to the south called themselves "Judah" after the larger of the two.

Israel in the north had 19 kings and the Bible says that *every one of them*, without exception, did evil in the eyes of the Lord. That northern kingdom was eventually conquered in 722 BC and its population was carried off into exile, leaving just Judah.

Jeremiah lived in Anathoth in Judah, but just inside the border, so he grew up looking across at a land that had been laid waste after centuries of rebellion against God.

It must have been a bit like living in South Korea, near the demilitarised zone, standing on a hilltop and seeing the wretched place North Korea became.

What about the kings in the southern kingdom of Judah? Most of them were evil as well, but they did have some good ones.

And Jeremiah was called during the reign of Judah's very last good king, Josiah. He brought in some much-needed reforms, but the people followed only half-heartedly.

In fact, Jeremiah's first recorded sermon (in chapter 2) was in the streets of Jerusalem, before a hostile crowd. He had been banned from religious buildings, because the establishment didn't like what he said.

God never has been - and never will be - confined to ecclesiastical buildings. If the church closes its doors to him, he just raises up prophetic people to speak his word somewhere else.

Jesus spoke more in the open air than he ever did in so-called holy places.

Well, the next major king after Josiah was Jehoiakim. And things went from superficially good to openly bad.

Jeremiah had been saying in the name of the Lord for decades that a great power would come from the north and flatten little Judah. He painstakingly wrote down his warnings from God for King Jehoiakim to read. The king took a penknife to the entire scroll and threw it on the fire.

Why was Jeremiah so pilloried and rejected? The answer is that people just wanted him to say something nice. They didn't want to hear that there was a train coming as

they played on the railway line. They wanted to be told that there wasn't a train coming because that sounds nicer.

Jeremiah. Nobody encouraged or backed him. The priests attacked him. The king snubbed him. The nation told him to stop being unpatriotic.

No wonder he looks so thoroughly fed up in Rembrandt's picture of him. Put yourself in Jeremiah's shoes; go through life, week after week, month after month, year after year with everyone putting their fingers to their ears as soon as you open your mouth.

Nobody listened. He became a laughing stock and an object of mockery.

Worse; he survived several attempts on his life. A priest had him beaten and put in the stocks for a day. He was arrested and thrown in a cistern and left for dead.

Calling

So, if you were God, who would you pick to speak boldly to an overwhelmingly hostile, antagonistic, unsympathetic public?

I'd go for someone hard, some fearsome colossus of a leader, built like a tank, with a booming voice. Someone with attitude...

Who does God choose? Someone a bit like Pike from Dad's Army... "You stupid boy..." God calls a shy, diffident youth, full of excuses. Jeremiah portrays himself as lightweight, tongue-tied, inexperienced.

But God chooses Jeremiah not for what he *is* but for the one hidden quality he knows Jeremiah will really need. The Book of Jeremiah goes on to show he had it in spades – *resilience*.

Winston Churchill once said, "Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm."

That's Jeremiah. He never gave up. He felt like it – most days. But he kept going. How did he endure even when he fell into utter despair? His resilience was down to one thing: *he knew God had called him*.

God chose and called *you* to belong to Christ. It was a settled decision made before time began, before the foundation of the world. By faith, you are God's precious child. God's call is not a matter of performance, it is a matter of position!

God called Jeremiah before he was born or even conceived. Which should carry a lot of weight when we think about abortion.

People often point to exceptional and tragic circumstances, but incest and rape account for only 1.5% of all terminations.

The truth is that 98.5% of terminations were for other reasons and abortion was the biggest single cause of human death worldwide in 2019. The former US President Ronald Reagan once said, "I've noticed that everyone who is for abortion has already been born."

Of course, we must be compassionate, kind, slow to judge and quick to help. We should show how we can be forgiven and how God can bring restoration and healing.

But to speak out on this today is to guarantee the kind of hostility that Jeremiah became accustomed to all his life.

He lived in similar times to ours actually; his nation, like ours, was increasingly antagonistic towards expressions of faith. More and more people wrote God off as irrelevant to their lives.

At first, people just thought that Jeremiah was a bit eccentric. But, as he kept speaking out, they began to find him annoying. And finally, when he refused to stop, he was silenced and attacked for being offensive.

But God says, "Don't focus on yourself and your limitations. And don't be afraid." Literally, "Don't be afraid of their faces."

Everyone wants to be liked. No one takes pleasure in rejection. Jeremiah's call was to a lifetime of disappointment. His message went unheeded and the nation fell to the Babylonians as he had warned over and over again.

God didn't promise him glowing success. But he did promise that his presence would go with him. "I am with you."

Ending

As I close, Jeremiah went down, in the end, as one of the Old Testament greats. So much of his life points to Jesus:

- Both were appointed before they were conceived
- Both were called before they reached adulthood
- Both were accused of madness
- Both prophesied the fall of Jerusalem
- Both wept over Jerusalem for that reason
- Both were mocked publicly
- Both were conspired against to be killed
- Both were declared "worthy of death" by corrupt priests

In fact, when Jesus said to his disciples "Who do people say I am?" they replied, "Some say, Jeremiah..."