

**Lectionary Readings:**    **Jeremiah 6: 16-21**  
                                   **Psalm 37: 1-11, (12-14)**  
                                   **Romans 9: 1-13**  
                                   **Luke 7: 11-17**

The typical message of an Old Testament Prophet has been mentioned on several occasions. In delivering the Lord's message they reiterated the promises, the covenant promises made to Abraham, Moses etc., but also delivered a warning to Israel for not walking in the Lord's way.

The reading from Jeremiah today is the middle section of chapter 6 – a chapter, headed in the NIV, as "*Jerusalem Under Siege*"; and in the NRSV as "*The Imminence and Horror of the Invasion*". The first 15 verses of this chapter read in the anglicised version of the NIV as follows:

- <sup>1</sup> 'Flee for safety, people of Benjamin!      Flee from Jerusalem!  
     Sound the trumpet in Tekoa!      Raise the signal over Beth Hakkerem! For disaster looms out of the north, even terrible destruction.
- <sup>2</sup> I will destroy Daughter Zion, so beautiful and delicate.
- <sup>3</sup> Shepherds with their flocks will come against her; they will pitch their tents round her, each tending his own portion.'
- <sup>4</sup> 'Prepare for battle against her!      Arise, let us attack at noon!  
     But, alas, the daylight is fading, and the shadows of evening grow long.
- <sup>5</sup> So arise, let us attack at night and destroy her fortresses!'
- <sup>6</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty says:  
     'Cut down the trees and build siege ramps against Jerusalem.  
     This city must be punished; it is filled with oppression.
- <sup>7</sup> As a well pours out its water, so she pours out her wickedness.  
     Violence and destruction resound in her; her sickness and wounds are ever before me.
- <sup>8</sup> Take warning, Jerusalem, or I will turn away from you and make your land desolate so that no one can live in it.'
- <sup>9</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty says:  
     'Let them glean the remnant of Israel as thoroughly as a vine; pass your hand over the branches again, like one gathering grapes.'
- <sup>10</sup> To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed<sup>a</sup> so that they cannot hear.  
     The word of the LORD is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it.
- <sup>11</sup> But I am full of the wrath of the LORD, and I cannot hold it in.  
     'Pour it out on the children in the street and on the young men gathered together; both husband and wife will be caught in it, and the old, those weighed down with years.
- <sup>12</sup> Their houses will be turned over to others, together with their fields and their wives, when I stretch out my hand against those who live in the land,' declares the LORD.
- <sup>13</sup> 'From the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike, all practise deceit.
- <sup>14</sup> They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. "Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace.
- <sup>15</sup> Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush.  
     So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when I punish them,' says the LORD.

**Footnotes**

- a. [Jeremiah 6:10](#) Hebrew *uncircumcised*

In verse 8, the prophet warns Jerusalem and in the opening verses of our reading (16-17) the Lord points out again His way:

- <sup>16</sup> **This is what the LORD says:**  
     '**Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.**  
     ***But you said, "We will not walk in it."***
- <sup>17</sup> **I appointed watchmen over you and said, "Listen to the sound of the trumpet!"**  
     ***But you said, "We will not listen."***

There is a way that pleases the Lord and leads to "rest for souls". For those who refuse to follow it, the Lord promises His opposition - the consequence of which can only be destruction.

This was not just a message for the Israelites at the time of Jeremiah – history is filled with people and nations who have followed their own 'devices and desires' with dire results.

The message is there for us, today – when we come to the "*crossroads*" are we seeking and walking in that "*good way*" described in verse 16? Have we found "*rest for our souls*"?

Let us pray that we are open to the Lord and His guidance – not like the Israelite people saying "*We will not walk in it*" and "*We will not listen*".

As I read Psalm 37, another Psalm of David, I have music going through my head – the same piece of music that I first heard when reading verse 16 of Jeremiah 6.

Felix Mendelssohn wrote his Oratorio ‘Elijah’; recounting the biblical account of the Prophet from the days of drought, through the ‘contest’ with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel to his escaping into the wilderness, encountering the Lord in the ‘Still Small Voice’ and returning to Israel ‘In the strength of the Lord’.

The text of the libretto is liberally taken from Scripture but not in specific, identifiable, verses as say in Handel’s Messiah.

At the point where Elijah is starting his journey into the wilderness and expressing his wish to die; an angel appears to him with these words:

O rest in the Lord; wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee thy heart’s desires:

O rest in the Lord; wait patiently for Him and He shall give thee thy heart’s desires, and He shall give thee thy heart’s desires.

Commit thy way unto Him, and trust in Him, commit thy way unto Him, and trust in Him, and fret not thyself because of evil doers.

O rest in the Lord; wait patiently for Him, wait patiently for Him:

O rest in the Lord; wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee thy heart’s desires, He shall give thee thy heart’s desires, and He shall give thee thy heart’s desires.

O rest in the Lord, O rest in the Lord; and wait, wait patiently for Him.

“*Resting in the Lord*” takes us back to Jeremiah.

“*Commitment, trust, waiting patiently, not being fretful, and the desires of your heart*” are all found in Psalm 37:

<sup>3</sup> **Trust in the LORD** and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.

<sup>4</sup> Take delight in the LORD, and **he will give you the desires of your heart.**

<sup>5</sup> **Commit your way to the LORD;** trust in him and he will do this:

<sup>6</sup> he will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun.

<sup>7</sup> Be still before the LORD and **wait patiently for him; do not fret** when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.

While on the subject of music; verses 1 and 2 of the Psalm remind me of a chorus from another Oratorio: (Psalm 37: 1-2)

<sup>1</sup> Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong;

<sup>2</sup> **for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.**

Johannes Brahms wrote a ‘Requiem’ quite unlike any previous ‘Catholic’ Mass. It is known as ‘The German Requiem’.

In the second chorus of the work the choir sings:

Behold, all flesh is as the grass, and all the glory of man is as the flower of the field.

**The grass is withered,** and the flower thereof is fallen.

The Scriptural references printed in the Oratorio tells us that Brahms was using a verse from 1 Peter – referring to it one finds that Peter, in turn, is quoting from Isaiah 40 (a very familiar passage):

<sup>1</sup> Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

<sup>2</sup> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.

<sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

<sup>4</sup> Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

<sup>5</sup> And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’

<sup>6</sup> A voice says, ‘Cry out.’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’

*‘All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.*

*<sup>7</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass.*

*<sup>8</sup> The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures for ever.’*

In an introduction, the author of the Psalms section of the Daily Study Bible writes about Psalm 37:

This is another “teaching” psalm, easy to learn in the original because there it is alphabetic, each two verses (with the odd exception) beginning with a different letter. But the fact that a class-room poem can be included in a “hymn book” of praise to God shows that the Hebrews regarded biblical instruction as a necessary aid to faith.

The psalm deals with both the fate of the wicked, and with the fate of the godly, discussing these two groups almost time about. Curiously enough it is addressed, not to God, as are most psalms, but to a class-room of young human beings.

Yet it does not form a continuity right through. Rather it is a collection of proverbs, linked only by the letters of the alphabet.

Today we find it interesting to discover that this psalm played an important role in the life of the Qumran Community, that Jewish sect which flourished in the century before Christ, and which preserved for us the Dead Sea Scrolls.

We all know the background to Paul's work as a 'missionary' for Christ. The first reference to him that we have in Scripture is in Acts 7: 58 – the stoning of Stephen; when those casting the stones have laid their outer garments *“at the feet of a young man named Saul”*.

Writing to the church in Philippi, Paul lays out the Jewish heritage he has laid aside: (Chapter 3)

### **No confidence in the flesh**

<sup>1</sup> Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. <sup>2</sup> Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. <sup>3</sup> For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh – <sup>4</sup> though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

<sup>7</sup> But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in<sup>[a]</sup> Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

#### **Footnotes**

a. [Philippians 3:9](#) Or through the faithfulness of

In this passage he speaks openly of his actions as a devout Jew, leading to his zeal for persecuting the Christian church.

Paul has been transformed; the ardent antagonist on the road to Damascus becomes the purposeful proponent of the Gospel – yet despite the transformation there can still be *“Paul's anguish over Israel”*. (NIV section heading to Romans 9: 1-5)

In our reading from Romans, Paul looks back at the history of his people leading to the coming of Messiah:

<sup>2</sup> I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. <sup>3</sup> For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, <sup>4</sup> the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. <sup>5</sup> Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, for ever praised!<sup>[a]</sup> Amen.

#### **Footnotes**

a. [Romans 9:5](#) Or Messiah, who is over all. God be for ever praised! Or Messiah. God who is over all be for ever praised!

The great pride of the Jews was their descent from Abraham – to whom the promises were made at the time of the call to leave his home city of Haran; the promise of being made into a great nation ([Genesis 12](#)). In [Genesis 15](#) the promises to Abram are given again but he points out that he has no heir - the Lord promises he will have a son.

Abram (not yet renamed) was getting very old. Sarai, possibly past child bearing age, tempts and persuades her husband to follow a custom of the day – to sleep with her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and produce an 'heir' for them by this means ([Genesis 16](#)). We know that Ishmael was the outcome of this 'human plan' – it was not however the fulfilment of God's plan for Abram and Sarai, the future was to be through their as yet unborn son Isaac.

[Genesis 17](#) describes a 91 year old Abram receiving the “Covenant of Circumcision” and becoming, by name, Abraham. At the same time Sarai becomes Sarah; Abraham asks the Lord if it is possible for a couple of their age to produce a son; he says to the Lord – “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing”. The Lord hears Abraham and promises that the descendants of Ishmael will also become a great nation but the COVENANT PROMISE is through Isaac.

It is this historical event that Paul refers to in verses 6-9 of our reading from Romans 9:

### **God's sovereign choice**

<sup>6</sup> It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.

<sup>7</sup> Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.

<sup>9</sup> For this was how the promise was stated: 'At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.'<sup>[b]</sup>

#### **Footnotes**

a. [Romans 9:7](#) Gen. 21:12

b. [Romans 9:9](#) Gen. 18:10,14

We remember the 'human tension' between Sarah and Hagar after the birth of Isaac and how Sarah insists that Hagar and Ishmael be driven away: ([Genesis 21](#))

### **Hagar and Ishmael sent away**

<sup>8</sup> The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast.

<sup>9</sup> But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, <sup>10</sup> and she said to Abraham, 'Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.'

<sup>11</sup> The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. <sup>12</sup> But God said to him, 'Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because **it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.**

<sup>13</sup> I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring.'

Paul also looks back to an event in the later history of the nation concerning the sons of Isaac, Esau and Jacob. We find the quotation, used by Paul, in Genesis 25:

#### **Jacob and Esau**

<sup>19</sup> This is the account of the family line of Abraham's son Isaac.

Abraham became the father of Isaac, <sup>20</sup> and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram<sup>[a]</sup> and sister of Laban the Aramean.

<sup>21</sup> Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The LORD answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. <sup>22</sup> The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, 'Why is this happening to me?' So she went to enquire of the LORD.

<sup>23</sup> The LORD said to her,

***'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger.'***

<sup>24</sup> When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb.

<sup>25</sup> The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau.<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>26</sup> After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.<sup>[c]</sup> Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

<sup>27</sup> The boys grew up, and Esau became a skilful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents.

<sup>28</sup> **Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.**

<sup>29</sup> Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished.

<sup>30</sup> He said to Jacob, 'Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!' (That is why he was also called Edom.<sup>[d]</sup>)

<sup>31</sup> Jacob replied, 'First sell me your birthright.'

<sup>32</sup> 'Look, I am about to die,' Esau said. 'What good is the birthright to me?'

<sup>33</sup> But Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.' So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

<sup>34</sup> Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

#### **Footnotes**

- a. [Genesis 25:20](#) That is, North-west Mesopotamia
- b. [Genesis 25:25](#) Esau may mean hairy.
- c. [Genesis 25:26](#) Jacob means he grasps the heel, a Hebrew idiom for he deceives.
- d. [Genesis 25:30](#) Edom means red.

Paul emphasises that the Lord's 'plan' is there from the beginning: (Romans 9)

<sup>10</sup> Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac.

<sup>11</sup> Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – **in order that God's purpose in election might stand: <sup>12</sup> not by works but by him who calls** – she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'<sup>[b]</sup>

#### **Footnotes**

- a. [Romans 9:12](#) Gen. 25:23
- b. [Romans 9:13](#) Mal. 1:2,3

These final verses may raise one or two issues for us. Firstly there is the reference to "God's purpose in election". Is this perhaps the origin of the Christian doctrine of Predestination?

I remember a friend in Australia who held the view that God had chosen him; he could not countenance he himself having any part in his own salvation, and this included his own response to the Lord,. A great friend but we could never agree on this doctrine!

The other potentially disturbing concept is that of the Lord "loving" Jacob and "hating" Esau.

An expansive note on Malachi 1:3 in the NIV Study Bible comments on the use of "love" and "hate":

God chose Jacob but not Esau. For the use of "love" and "hate" here compare how Leah was "hated" in that Jacob loved Rachel more (Genesis 29:31, 33; see also Deuteronomy 21:16-17). Likewise, believers are to "hate" their parents (Luke 14:26) in the sense that they love Christ even more (Matthew 10:37).

Paul was part of the "elect" – living an exemplary life within the promises made to Abraham yet he found the truth in all the prophets had taught about the Messiah and above all else he encountered and came to know Jesus as his personal Lord and Saviour.

The Gospel reading, from Luke, displays the "love" and "compassion" we expect to find in any account of Jesus' ministry. It is a chance encounter with a funeral procession – the widow following the bier that carried the body of her only son, accompanied by a large crowd of townspeople.

As a widow had she depended on her son to look after her? – We can imagine the situation in which she now finds herself. She had the sympathy of friends in Nain but would it extend to anything more than that, sympathy?

Jesus acted and restored what had been.

Is there a parallel here for us today in the midst of the global pandemic? We live in a country with a comprehensive health service; extensive prophylactic covid testing; well planned provision and distribution of vaccine – while many parts of the underdeveloped world experience rising infection rates; poverty through unemployment; little or no access to any vaccine. We can certainly feel and show “compassion” but what more can or should we do?

Immediately before the Lectionary passage in Luke 7 we read another account of healing by Jesus – which I must describe as one of my favourites! – not because of anything Jesus does but for the displayed level of faith in one man, a ‘Gentile’:

#### **The faith of the centurion**

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum.

<sup>2</sup> There a centurion’s servant, whom his master valued highly, was ill and about to die. <sup>3</sup> The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant.

<sup>4</sup> When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, ‘This man deserves to have you do this, <sup>5</sup> because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.’ <sup>6</sup> So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: ‘Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. <sup>7</sup> That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you.

**But say the word, and my servant will be healed. <sup>8</sup> For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, “Go”, and he goes; and that one, “Come”, and he comes. I say to my servant, “Do this”, and he does it.’**

<sup>9</sup> When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, ‘**I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.**’

<sup>10</sup> Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

The God of Abraham praise,  
who reigns enthroned above,  
Ancient of everlasting Days,  
and God of love.  
Jehovah! Great I AM!  
By earth and heaven confessed;  
I bow and bless the sacred name  
for ever blessed.

He by Himself has sworn,  
I on his oath depend:  
I shall, on eagles’ wings upborne,  
to heaven ascend;  
I shall behold his face,  
I shall his power adore  
and sing the wonders of his grace  
for evermore.

The God who reigns on high  
the great archangels sing:  
and ‘Holy, holy, holy,’ cry,  
‘Almighty King,  
who was and is the same,  
and evermore shall be;  
Jehovah, Father, great I AM,  
we worship thee.’

Before the Saviour’s face  
the ransomed nations bow;  
o’erwhelmed at his almighty grace,  
for ever new:  
he shows his prints of love,  
they kindle to a flame,  
and sound through all the worlds above  
the slaughtered Lamb.

The whole triumphant host  
give thanks to God on high;  
‘Hail, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!’  
they ever cry.  
Hail, Abraham’s God, and ours!  
We join the heavenly throng,  
and celebrate with all our powers  
in endless song.

Thomas Olivers