

Lectionary Readings: **Jeremiah 7: 1-16**
 Psalm 39
 Romans 9: 14-26
 Luke 7:36 – 8:3

Last week verses from our Lectionary readings brought to mind words and melody from Mendelssohn’s Elijah – the same has happened this week as I read the passage from Jeremiah.

Very early in the Oratorio we hear:

“Ye people rend your hearts, rend your hearts and not your garments”

The sentiment expressed in the Oratorio is 50% correct for our reading – “rend your hearts”, **yes**; but **no** to the rending of garments; the Judeans to whom the Prophet’s message is delivered clearly see no need to change their lives!

The passage in Jeremiah 7 is given, in the NIV, a heading of **“False religion worthless”**:

¹ This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:

² Stand at the gate of the LORD’s house and there proclaim this message:

“Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD.

³ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: **reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place.**

⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!’

⁵ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶ if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave to your ancestors for ever and ever.

⁸ But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

The call of the Lord is to “Rend your hearts” – *“to reform your ways and your actions”*. It is a challenge that has been with the Lord’s people from that day to this. Where is my/your heart? What are my/your central and most important desires and aspirations?

The Word of the Lord continues:

⁹ “Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, (or and swear by false gods) burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, ‘We are safe’– safe to do all these detestable things?

¹¹ Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you?

But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

It would appear that the people of Judah were not only worshipping Baal but also involving themselves in socially unacceptable, even criminal, activities. We have an idiomatic saying about “running with the hare and hunting with the hounds” – in this context worshipping Baal and indulging in its associated activities one moment, then coming to the temple to worship the Lord.

Returning to the Oratorio – “the rending of hearts and not garments” – clothes were frequently rent as a sign of mourning but also to indicate sorrow or indignation. Reuben rent his clothes when he found Joseph had been taken from the pit and sold, by his other brothers, to the passing merchants (Genesis 37:29); all the sons of Jacob rent their clothes when Joseph’s silver cup was found in the top of Benjamin’s sack (Genesis 44:13). A messenger came to Eli with his clothes rent to tell of the taking of the ark of God and of the death of his two sons (1 Samuel 4:12). David rent his garments when he heard that Absalom had slain his brothers (2 Samuel 13:31).

As an example of indignation the high priest rent his garment when Jesus spoke what he thought was blasphemy (Matthew 26:65).

The rending of garments was clearly an expression of a deep and important experience. Here in Jeremiah there is no rending of hearts, no rending of garments – the Israelites have no intention to change anything, they are happy with the lives they are living, totally unaware of ‘sin’.

The Lord finally warns them as to the consequence of their turning from Him:

¹² **“Go now to the place in Shiloh where I first made a dwelling for my Name, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel.**

¹³ While you were doing all these things, declares the LORD, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer.

¹⁴ Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors.

¹⁵ I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim.”

¹⁶ ‘So do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you.

The Lord reminds them that He has spoken to them “*again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer*”.

Are we aware to the Lord speaking to us or do we like those Judeans not listen or not answer?

The Psalm, we read this week, is the whole of Psalm 39 – **For the director of music. For Jeduthun. A psalm of David.**

The NIV Bible Commentary gives a heading and Introduction:

A Stranger to Life and an Alien with God

In a moving way the author of this psalm draws us into the reality of life with its vexing problems and the unresolved quest for meaning. This psalm is in the form of an *individual lament*

The commentator divides the psalm into six sections:

- I. Silence before the Lord (vv.1-3)
- II. Prayer for Divine Illumination (vv.4-6)
- III. Prayer for Deliverance (vv.7-8)
- IV. Silence Before the Lord (v. 9)
- V. Prayer for Divine Sustenance (vv.10-11)
- VI. Prayer for Deliverance (vv.12-13)

Brahms sets verses 4-7 as a very well known Baritone solo in the German Requiem: (English Text of the Requiem)

**Lord, let me know mine end, and the number of my days:
let me know how frail I am, that I be made sure how long I have to live.**

Surely, Thou hast made my days as an handbreadth before Thee: And my lifetime is as nothing to Thee :
Verily every man living is altogether vanity.

For surely man walketh as a shadow: and he disquieteth himself in vain, yea, all in vain: his riches, he knoweth not
who shall gather them.

Now, Lord, what then do I hope for ? My hope is in Thee

These verses were also set in a “Song of Farewell” by Charles Hubert Hastings Parry (1848-1918) and as an anthem by Maurice Greene (1696-1755); ‘Master of the King’s Musick’ from 1735.

Three further introductions to the psalm – the first from the NIV Study Bible:

The poignant prayer of a soul deeply troubled by the fragility of human life. He is reminded of this by the present illness through which God is rebuking him (vv.10-11) for his “transgressions” (v.8). Psalm 38 speaks of silence before the enemy, Psalm 39 of silence before God. Both are prayers in times of illness (God’s “rebuke”, v.11; Psalm 38:1); both acknowledge sin, and both express deep trust in God.
In addition, this psalm has many links with Psalm 90.

The second introduction is from The Daily Study Bible (G.A.F.Knight):

David appointed Jeduthun as one of the chief musicians to lead public worship (1 Chronicles 16:41-42 and 25:1-3).
This psalm has been used in various ways:

- (a) The Synagogue has employed it to interpret Jacob’s conversation with Pharaoh (Genesis 47:7-10);
- (b) **The Anglican Prayer Book of 1549 recommended it be read at a funeral;**
- (c) The Catholic Benedictine Order based its rule of silence upon verses 1-2.

In all, the psalm raises certain deep questions of faith, questions that go beyond a rational answer.

The third introduction takes us back in time to Matthew Henry’s Commentary (circa. 1705):

David seems to have been in a great strait when he penned this psalm, and, upon some account or other, very uneasy; for it is with some difficulty that he conquers his passion, and composes his spirit himself to take the good counsel which he had given to others (Psalm 37) to rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him, without fretting; for it is easier to give the good advice than to give the good example of quietness under affliction. What was the particular trouble which gave occasion for the conflict David was now in does not appear. Perhaps it was the death of some dear friend or relation that was the trial of his patience, and that suggested to him these meditations of morality; and at the same time, it should seem too, he himself was weak and ill, and under some prevailing distemper.

His enemies likewise were seeking advantages against him, and watched for his halting, that they might have something to reproach him for. Thus aggrieved,

- I. He relates the struggle that was in his breast between grace and corruption, between passion and patience (vv.1-3).
- II. He meditates upon the doctrine of man’s frailty and mortality, and prays to God to instruct him in it (vv.4-6).
- III. He applies to God for the pardon of his sins, the removal of his afflictions, and the lengthening out of his life till he was ready for death (vv.7-13).

This is a funeral psalm, and very proper for the occasion; in singing it we should get our hearts duly affected with the brevity, uncertainty and calamitous state of human life; and those on whose comforts God has, by death, made breaches, will find this psalm of great use to them, in order to their obtaining what we ought much to aim at under such an affliction, which is to get it sanctified to us for our spiritual benefit and to get our hearts reconciled to the holy will of God in it.

We see clear use of 18th century English in the final paragraph above. Up to that point the meaning has always been clear, even when the language has been complex!

Our reading, last week, from Paul's letter to the Romans ended with a passage entitled (in NIV) **"God's Sovereign Choice"**:

- ⁶ It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.
⁷ 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.'
⁸ 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.
⁹ For this was how the promise was stated: 'At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son.'
¹⁰ Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac.
¹¹ Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad – in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹² not by works but by him who calls – she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'
¹³ Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'

The passage today, verses 14-26, continues under the same heading of **"God's Sovereign Choice"** and Paul defends all of his previous argument. He commences with a question, followed by an emphatic answer:

¹⁴ What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!

In the course of 11 verses he quotes Old Testament Scriptures five times. He follows the 'emphatic answer' above with a reference to Moses meeting the Lord, 'one to one', in 'The Tent of Meeting': (Exodus 33)

- ¹⁴ The LORD replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'
¹⁵ Then Moses said to him, 'If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.
¹⁶ How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?'
¹⁷ And the LORD said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.'
¹⁸ Then Moses said, 'Now show me your glory.'
¹⁹ And the LORD said, 'I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence.
I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.
²⁰ But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.'

The second reference that Paul uses also involves Moses and a confrontation with Pharaoh following the sixth of the promised plagues:

- ¹³ Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Get up early in the morning, confront Pharaoh and say to him, "This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: let my people go, so that they may worship me, ¹⁴ or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.
¹⁵ For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth.
¹⁶ But I have raised you up (or have spared you) for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.
¹⁷ You still set yourself against my people and will not let them go. ¹⁸ Therefore, at this time tomorrow I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt, from the day it was founded till now.'

Later in the passage, Paul makes reference to the inappropriate action of human beings 'talking back' to God. He quotes from Isaiah 29:16 (see also Isaiah 45:9) – the potter and the clay and goes on to add in his own words:

- ²¹ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?

The final two Scriptural references both come from the early chapters of Hosea.

When the word of the Lord first comes to the prophet he receives a strange instruction: (Hosea 1)

- ² When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, 'Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD.'
³ So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

He received further instructions from the Lord to name his second child, a daughter, *"Lo-Ruhama, for I will no longer show love to the house of Israel"*. The third child was similarly to be called *"Lo-Ammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God"*.

Paul ends his argument:

- ² What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction?
²³ What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – ²⁴ even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?
²⁵ As he says in Hosea:
'I will call them "my people" who are not my people; and I will call her "my loved one" who is not my loved one.' (2:23)
²⁶ and, **'In the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," there they will be called "children of the living God."**' (1:10)

The account Luke gives of “**Jesus anointed by a sinful woman**” has equivalent, but significantly different parallels in the other Gospels. Here in Luke, Jesus has been invited to dine in the house of a clearly orthodox Pharisee whose name we later learn is Simon.

A ‘woman who has lived a sinful life’ brings an alabaster jar of perfume, washes Jesus’ feet with her tears, dries them with her hair then kisses them and pours on the perfume.

Simon the Pharisee, we gather from the text, is ‘silently offended’:

³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner.’

The equivalent passage in Matthew and in Mark takes place in Bethany, in the home of Simon the Leper, very late in Jesus’ ministry. In these Gospels we are just told ‘a woman’ comes – with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume (Mark tells us it was made from pure nard).

In Matthew she pours the perfume onto the head of Jesus – the disciples are indignant; the perfume could have been sold for a lot of money and that given to the poor.

In Mark she breaks the jar and pours the perfume on Jesus’ head – the indignant this time, we are told, are some of those present; the disciples are not specifically mentioned.

John’s Gospel has detail difference. Six days before that final Passover meal; again in Bethany but this time at the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. Martha is serving at the meal; it is Mary who takes a pint of pure nard, pours it on Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair. It appears that Judas Iscariot was the sole objector – again wanting to sell the perfume and give to the poor; it was worth about a year’s wages. John however clearly had a poor regard for Judas:

⁶ He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

Returning to the account in Luke Jesus responds to that ‘silently offended’ reaction of the host. He poses the question about two people owing substantially different amounts to a money-lender. The debt having been forgiven – who is the most indebted? There can only be one answer of course and Simon rather grudgingly confirms this:

⁴³ Simon replied, ‘I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.’
‘You have judged correctly,’ Jesus said.

(We find an alternative version of the debt/debtor ‘story’ in Matthew 18:23-24.)

Jesus then gently rebukes His host for his lack of the common courtesies on entering a house at that time – feet not washed, not being greeted with a welcoming kiss, no anointing with oil.

Jesus points out that all of these things have been covered by the ‘sinful’ woman’s actions; then declares her sins forgiven – in doing so He is effectively declaring Himself as the Messiah for only God can forgive sins. The final words in this account:

⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, ‘**Your faith has saved you**; go in peace.’

Let us pray the same can be said for each one of us – that we, also, have been saved through faith.

In the first three verses of chapter 8 we learn some interesting ‘house-keeping’ facts related to Jesus’ ministry. As he travels from place to place the disciples went with him but there were others accompanying them – some women are specifically mentioned, who support Jesus and the disciples out of their own means.

It would appear, therefore, that some of these women were ‘of substance’, some from prominent positions, e.g. “*Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod’s household*”.

Have faith in God, my heart,
Trust and be unafraid;
God will fulfil in every part
Each promise he has made.

Have faith in God, my mind,
Though oft your light burns low;
God’s mercy holds a wiser plan
Than you can fully know.

Have faith in God, my soul;
His cross for ever stands;
And neither life nor death can pluck
His children from his hands.

Lord Jesus, make me whole;
Grant me no resting place,
Until I rest, heart, mind, and soul,
The captive of your grace.