

**Lectionary Readings:**    **Jeremiah 10: 1-16**  
                                   **Psalm 49**  
                                   **Romans 11: 25-36**  
                                   **Luke 8: 26-39**

In this passage, headed “**Gods and Idols**” in the NIV, Jeremiah is contrasting worship of the Lord and worship of idols - ‘gods’ – that are fabricated by human hands:

<sup>1</sup> Hear what the LORD says to you, people of Israel. <sup>2</sup>This is what the LORD says:

‘Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the heavens, though the nations are terrified by them.

<sup>3</sup>**For the practices of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel.**

<sup>4</sup>They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it will not totter.

<sup>5</sup>Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk.

Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good.’

Two anecdotes come to mind – one of which some of you may have heard as a sermon illustration.

In my first teaching post – I was living in a bed-sit in Portsmouth. One Sunday I was invited to lunch at the family home of a Boys’ Brigade friend who worshipped at London Road Baptist Church. He lived on a long, straight, cul-de-sac and as we drove down the road in his car I idly commented that I saw his neighbours were busy at their Sunday worship – washing their cars! My friend was very upset that I should describe this activity in such terms!!

The more I thought about it, the more I could see some truth behind it – and therein lies a challenge for each one of us. To these neighbours all along the road the weekly wash of the car was a **priority**. We have a near neighbour in Blandford who is always washing, or polishing, his vehicle (in mitigation - the paintwork is black so I can appreciate the need to remove any traffic film).

What is that challenge to us? What is the priority in our lives? Do we place the Lord at the centre or do we like those ancient people, and many today, ‘worship’ material, man made things?

The second anecdote adds something beyond the words of Jeremiah. Speaking of the man made idols he says in verse 5 “*Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good*”.

We were on holiday in India – the Delhi, Jaipur, Agra triangle. For a number of days we were fascinated by the temples – their architecture and artistry. The ‘gods’ represented by the idols were intricately carved and beautifully decorated – many, many tourist photographs were taken. There was one occasion, however, in one particular temple where I suddenly felt oppressed – there was a feeling that ‘evil’ lurked in the building. I discovered that my wife had exactly the same feeling at the same time. From that point on in the holiday we viewed the temples in a different light.

As Christians we are very happy to talk about the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. Are we as quick to acknowledge that there are opposing spiritual powers?

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, describes the ‘battle’ that faces us and how we should approach it: (Ephesians 6)

<sup>10</sup> Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

<sup>11</sup> Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.

<sup>12</sup> **For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.**

<sup>13</sup> Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

The final verse of Psalm 49 (v.20) follows on from our reading from Jeremiah:

<sup>20</sup> People who have wealth but lack understanding are like the beasts that perish.

The introductory notes on this Psalm in the NIV Study Bible record:

A word of instruction from the temple following upon Psalms 46-48 (*46 – A celebration of the security of Jerusalem as the city of God (the inspiration for Ein Feste Berg ist unser Gott); 47 – A celebration of the universal reign of Israel’s God: a testimony to the nations;*

*48 – A celebration of the security of Zion).*

It concerns rich fools who proudly rely on their great wealth and on themselves to assure their security in the world (see also Psalm 52). The Levitical author knows what it is to be without wealth (see Numbers 18: 21-24; Deuteronomy 14: 27-29) and has observed the attitudes of many of the rich (vv.5-6). He has seen through their folly, however, and offers his **wisdom** for all to hear (vv.1-2), so that those who are in awe of the rich may be freed from their spell. Inescapable death is their undoing and destiny, and in the end the “upright will rule over them” (v.14). The date of this psalm may well be post-exilic.

The dedication of the Psalm is “*For the director of music. Of the sons of Korah. A psalm*”. The “sons of Korah” refers to the Levitical choir made up of the descendants of Korah appointed by David to serve in the temple liturgy. The Korahites represented the Levitical family of Kohath son of Levi. Psalm 49 is the final psalm in a collection ascribed to the “Sons of Korah” (Psalms 42-49). Psalms 84-85 and 87-88 have a similar ascription.

The opening words of the commentary in the Daily Study Bible are:

This psalm is less likely to have been sung by the temple congregation in the first place than to have been taught in the temple-school next door. Yet the whole-hearted and sincere study of the Word of God can become so exciting that one is led to sing thanks to God in joy and love. We have here a meditation on the transitoriness of life, **and on the futility of trusting in the things that money can buy** (those priorities discussed in Jeremiah). The psalm forms a good background to Jesus' parable of the rich farmer that we find in Luke 12: 13-21. Note that the language of verse 2 belongs to the "*Wisdom*" school of Old Testament religious thought.

The psalm begins (remember we are only a small classroom!) by addressing the whole world, even as the Pope does from the balcony of St. Peter's in Rome, *urbi et orbi*, to the city of Rome and to the world. For, of course, death is universal. The people of Madras and of Manchester equally are going to die. So are the rich, and so are the poor. No man can bribe the angel of death to stay away, far less bribe God.

The whole theme of the psalm is rather depressing but through it we see the hope, belief and expectation of the author – we will be judged; to give an account of our lives – based on what we are not on what we possess. In the Book of Common Prayer we read one of the Biblical passages spoken as 'the deceased' is first 'met' by the celebrant:

We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord.

This is a composite - based on 1 Timothy 6:7 and Job 1:21. The passage in 1 Timothy is headed "*Love of Money*":

<sup>3</sup> If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, <sup>4</sup> they are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions <sup>5</sup> and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.

<sup>6</sup> But godliness with contentment is great gain.

<sup>7</sup> For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.

<sup>8</sup> But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

<sup>9</sup> Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

<sup>10</sup> **For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.**

Once again, we must enquire after the priorities in our lives, praying that we may not be yearning for material possessions or for 'money' but rather seeking the Lord's direction.

For several chapters Paul has been continuing with the message of the prophets, commenting that there is only a small remnant of his own people (a fact which distresses him greatly) who have heard and understood the Lord's Plan in Jesus. He has argued cogently, as a trained Pharisee would, that the promises and the inheritance come only through Isaac and his descendants – we remember the other son of Abraham, not born of the Lord's will but out of human impatience, following the 'worldly' customs of the time. Because he is a son of Abraham, the Lord promises to also make his descendants a great nation but they are not part of the 'special' promise made to Abraham.

Now in the latter part of Romans 11 we encounter a rather perplexing passage with the NIV heading – "**All Israel will be saved**". The Message paraphrases the passage under the title "**A Complete Israel**":

#### **A Complete Israel**

<sup>25-29</sup> I want to lay all this out on the table as clearly as I can, friends.

This is complicated. It would be easy to misinterpret what's going on and arrogantly assume that you're royalty and they're just rabble, out on their ears for good.

But that's not it at all. This hardness on the part of insider Israel toward God is temporary.

Its effect is to open things up to all the outsiders so that we end up with a full house.

Before it's all over, there will be a complete Israel. As it is written,

A champion will stride down from the mountain of Zion; he'll clean house in Jacob.

And this is my commitment to my people: removal of their sins. (Various Isaiah and Jeremiah references)

From your point of view as you hear and embrace the good news of the Message, it looks like the Jews are God's enemies.

But looked at from the long-range perspective of God's overall purpose, they remain God's oldest friends.

God's gifts and God's call are under full warranty—never cancelled, never rescinded.

<sup>30-32</sup> There was a time not so long ago when you were on the outs with God.

But then the Jews slammed the door on him and things opened up for you.

Now *they* are on the outs. But with the door held wide open for you, they have a way back in.

In one way or another, God makes sure that we all experience what it means to be outside so that he can personally open the door and welcome us back in.

The more down to earth language of this paraphrase may well give us a greater understanding of this passage.

The last four verses of the reading in the NIV translation are in the form of a Doxology:

<sup>33</sup> Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and<sup>(a)</sup> knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

<sup>34</sup> Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?<sup>(b)</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?<sup>(c)</sup>

<sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and for him are all things.

To him be the glory for ever! Amen.

**Footnotes**

a. [Romans 11:33](#) Or riches and the wisdom and the

b. [Romans 11:34](#) Isaiah 40:13

c. [Romans 11:35](#) Job 41:11

Looking in the Scriptural Index of Singing the Faith, we find a well known hymn by John Mason, associated with Romans 11:33:

How shall I sing that majesty  
which angels do admire?  
Let dust in dust and silence lie;  
sing, sing ye heavenly choir.  
Thousands of thousands stand around  
thy throne, O God most high;  
ten thousand times ten thousand sound  
thy praise; but who am I?

Thy brightness unto them appears,  
whilst I thy footsteps trace;  
a sound of God comes to my ears,  
but they behold thy face.  
They sing because thou art their sun;  
Lord, send a beam on me:  
for where heaven is but once begun  
there alleluias be.

How great a being, Lord, is thine,  
which doth all beings keep!  
Thy knowledge is the only line  
to sound so vast a deep.  
Thou art a sea without a shore,  
a sun without a sphere;  
thy time is now and evermore,  
thy place is everywhere.

Matt Redman bases the words of STF 670 on verses 35 and 36 of the same chapter:

We have nothing to give  
that didn't first come from your hand;  
we have nothing to offer you  
which you did not provide.  
Every good, perfect gift comes from  
your kind and gracious heart,  
and all we do is give back to you  
what always has been yours.

*Lord, we're breathing the breath  
that you gave us to breathe,  
to worship you, to worship you.  
And we're singing these songs  
with the very same breath,  
to worship you, to worship you*

Who has given to you  
that it should be paid back to him?  
Who has given to you  
as if you needed anything?  
From you and to you and through you  
come all things, O Lord,  
and all we do is give back to you  
what always has been yours.

Immediately before the account of the healing of the 'demon-possessed' man Luke records Jesus and the disciples crossing the 'Sea of Galilee':

<sup>22</sup> One day Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let us go over to the other side of the lake.'

So they got into a boat and set out.

<sup>23</sup> As they sailed, he fell asleep.

A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger.

<sup>24</sup> The disciples went and woke him, saying, 'Master, Master, we're going to drown!'

He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm.

<sup>25</sup> 'Where is your faith?' he asked his disciples.

In fear and amazement they asked one another, 'Who is this?

He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.'

After the 'storm' they reach the region of the Gerasenes / Gadarenes / Gergesenes – alternative names found in some manuscripts.

As they land they are confronted with the 'demon-possessed' man from the town. He is clearly a well known character who has been driven out by the ordinary citizens of the town for we read:

For a long time this man had not worn clothes or lived in a house, but had lived in the tombs. and

Many times it had seized him, **and though he was chained hand and foot and kept under guard, he had broken his chains** and had been driven by the demon into solitary places.

Today we would say that this man was suffering from some extreme form of mental illness. Earlier I described that sense of oppression felt in an Indian temple – there was a feeling of some 'evil' presence. If this experience was genuine is it possible for a non-beneficial 'spirit' to have control of a human being?

In this account we note first of all that the man immediately recognised Jesus as the "Son of the Most High God". We read of the 'legion' of demons being transferred to a whole herd of pigs which instantly runs down a steep slope into the lake where the animals drown.

Those who had been tending the herd rush into the town to report what has happened – this brings out the crowd who find the man they all know, and I suspect fear, sitting calmly at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind!

We read that they were afraid; in fact their fear was so great they asked Jesus to leave their region – which he did.

The man who had been healed wanted to go with Jesus:

<sup>38</sup> The man from whom the demons had gone out begged to go with him, **but Jesus sent him away, saying,**

<sup>39</sup> **'Return home and tell how much God has done for you.'**

**So the man went away and told all over the town how much Jesus had done for him.**

This must be one of the first accounts of 'evangelism' in the Gospels – Jesus has not yet sent out the disciples to preach and to heal.

The refrain to STF 94 is linked, in the Scriptural Index, to this man returning home and telling how much Jesus had done for him:

To God be the glory, great things he has done!  
So loved he the world that he gave us his Son,  
who yielded his life in atonement for sin,  
and opened the life-gate that all may go in:  
*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!*  
*Let the earth hear his voice!*  
*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!*  
*Let the people rejoice!*  
*O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son;*  
*and give him the glory – great things he has done!*

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,  
to every believer the promise of God!  
And every offender who truly believes,  
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives:  
*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! etc.*

Great things he has taught us, great things he has done,  
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;  
but purer, and higher, and greater will be  
our wonder, our rapture, when Jesus we see:  
*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! etc.*

Frances Jane van Alstyne (Fanny Crosby)