

28Aug2022 Jeremiah 2, Hebrews 13, Luke 14

Last week Francis referred to the verse 'Open our lips and our mouths shall proclaim your praise', how the woman healed in the synagogue spoke out her praise for what God had done in her life, and the effect that had; encouraging us to speak out what God does in our lives, and talk about our life in God. How was that for you this last week?

Two of today's readings shed light on this and help us to think about how we can speak out more about our life in Christ, with each other and overflowing into our interactions with others.

The first, the passage from Jeremiah comes with a health warning. Jeremiah is a prophet, and brings some of the most direct challenges God gives to his people. So the challenge we hear from this passage may also seem very confronting. But I'll also bring out what the passage from Hebrews can say about our speaking out about our life in God. This is more practical – how we can respond to the harsher prophetic challenge of Jeremiah.

So Let's look at what Jeremiah has to say to us?

Jeremiah is speaking to God's people in exile – image of divorce court – It begins by asking the question; what has God done that would motivate God's people to become unfaithful? Implied answer – nothing. Given all that the Lord has done in bringing the ancestors through the wilderness and in establishing a committed relationship with them, it is shocking that they would go away from the Lord. It is even more shocking that they pursued other gods, even though those supposed gods were in fact nothing. Our translation says that the ancestors "went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves" (verse 5b). The Hebrew word translated "worthless" is *hevel*, the basic meaning of which is "vapor," sometimes translated vanity. In pursuing gods who are nothing, the ancestors became nothing themselves. Pursuit of insubstantial gods produces an insubstantial people.

Second, the priests, rulers, and prophets are also condemned for their poor leadership and transgression. Even the ones who study God's teachings did not follow God! The prophets did not prophesy in the name of God but the name of Baal, the Canaanite deity. This is a scathing condemnation of empty, fraudulent leadership - priests who fail to call on God, judges making judgments from the law without knowing the spirit of the Law's author. One charge in particular is repeated: "They did not say, 'where is the Lord?'" (Jeremiah 2:6,8). The people did not ask, nor did their priests. They stopped seeking God.

Jeremiah implied that the ancestors' going after other gods was incredible and shocking. Now he says that his listeners' doing so is also ridiculous. Even people who worship non-entities as gods don't change their gods (verses 10-11), yet Israel has exchanged commitment to the God who has blessed them (and would bless them again) to pursue non-gods who can do nothing for them. They could have "the fountain of living water," but instead they settle for "cracked cisterns that can hold no water" (verse 13).

The heart of the prosecution's case is idolatry; God comes at the subject in three different ways: the people have chased after worthless things (and become worthless themselves in the process); have "changed gods" (forsaking the one who made them what they are today); and have tried to draw strength from worthless sources (cracked cisterns)

Another accusation is that the people have simply forgotten that God was present leading them out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. And in that forgetting they defiled the land once they got there.

The familiar metaphor of exchanging the living water of God for cracked cisterns sums it all up.

- What *is* this metaphor, and this passage, about? It's about idolatry. It's a familiar subject, but Jeremiah uses a new metaphor to help his people see it with fresh eyes. For ourselves the tricky thing about idolatry is that often, when we're doing it, it doesn't seem like we're worshipping a false god. It seems like we're worshipping a true god. Or it seems like we are pursuing good ends, ordained by our true god. It seems like we are pursuing the something necessary for our survival, and if we believe that our true god desires our survival, then surely the thing we pursue is not idolatrous. Even if it feels empty and dry. Even if it really is draining us of life and soul. Let's think about what can cause us to look elsewhere than to God for our source of purpose? What can prevent us from realizing we are in danger of doing so? The world around us has all sorts of ideas about what is a fulfilling life and what values we should pursue – freedom, tolerance, success.

For us today, it is not incidental that Jeremiah's metaphor invokes the technology of the time, digging cisterns to collect sparse water in a dry land. Jeremiah tells us that idolatry is the act of trusting in our own technologies as we move further and further from the ground of our being. Such idolatry leads us to forsake the very God who sustains and nourishes us as we work to master and develop our environments, conquer obstacles, establish security, and cultivate family and social circles. Too often we trade a glorious gift and calling to go after things with no substance, no meaning, and no worth, distracted by comfort, boredom, anxiety, or ambition.

When we exchange God for an idol, says Jeremiah, we are transformed (2:11). We become like what we pursue (2:5). If we pursue what is empty, we become empty. If we become empty of the living water then we will find it difficult to speak of our life in God because there is no real life. If we find that we rarely speak of what God is doing in our lives, have we become empty, only thinking of our own needs and turning God into someone to meet those needs. Has our God, our Lord, become the one who scratches where we itch.

Do we take God and God's providence and faithfulness for granted? Do we put our time and energy into fruitless pursuits—looking for love and fulfillment in all the wrong places? Are we more zealous in spreading the word about our favorite rhubarb pie recipe or rugby team than about God's action in our lives. Perhaps we may realise that in putting our lives together we draw more on the dry wells of human wisdom and knowledge (even Biblical knowledge) while in our gatherings, the message, liturgy, and songs keep trying to get us excited about the living waters that are our source of real life. It is as we drink of these living waters that we have something to speak of about God in our lives.

As I said it would, the reading from Jeremiah offers a very confronting challenge to us in our speaking out about our life in God. If we can't speak of it where is our relationship with God really at? Let us all consider how we can develop and grow a real relationship with the living God.

The Hebrews passage has some practical ways we can go about our life in God so that we have much more to say about this life.

It has six instructions for the hearers. They lived in hostile, indifferent world and needed to be set apart from broader culture. We too live in a world like that.

The first instruction is very familiar – Let mutual love continue - Love your brothers and sisters – your fellow Christians as family. Living in mutual love we will have the security to speak about anything, including especially our life in God, with each other.

Secondly don't become an insular community focused only on selves – love stranger as well. Be hospitable to them, welcoming them. We want to welcome others to our fellowship meals so that we can speak of our lives in God with them too.

The hearers of the Letter to the Hebrews were living in a world where persecution of their fellow Christians, including prison and torture, was happening. They were exhorted , as those who have been persecuted, to remember those who were in prison or mistreated. We too should care for each other in times of distress. Like them we need to see each other as deserving of help whenever one is in need, no matter how that need occurred. We can regard others less fortunate than ourselves as being worthy of our help because we can also know that we are dependent on God – this attitude is different from that in the society around us so gives us the opportunity to explain ourselves – to speak of the reasons we have for our behaviour.

We are to uphold the purity of the marriage relationship, and faithfulness in marriage, - again an opportunity to explain our reliance on God to help us do what seems so difficult in today's society.

We are to be contented with what we have and acknowledge that what we have is sufficient if Jesus is with us to help and protect us. We can speak with confidence about our life with God if we do actually trust him for help.

And finally we are to remember those who have led the way in our lives, who have gone before us on this path, who are examples to us of faithfulness – another great topic for our conversation about God in our lives.

This all leads, according to the author of Hebrews, to continually offering a sacrifice of praise – what we say if we really confess his name - and to doing good and sharing what we have, for God's pleasure.

So two passages that reveal more to us of what is involved in speaking about God in our lives. Jeremiah challenges us to be drinking of God's living water in a real relationship with him - if we fill our lives with good seeming idols instead we will be empty of anything to say about God in our lives. And Hebrews encourages us to really live that life in God which will provide the topics of conversation about God in our lives. So let us pray that God will open our lips so that our mouths will proclaim His praise, from the depths of our being in him.

We begin by singing our praises now.