

BEYOND THE DOOM AND GLOOM

Sunday 18th September 2016
Jeremiah 8:18-19:1



I wonder if you have ever heard of a place called Megiddo? It's located in lower Galilee not all that far from Nazareth where Jesus lived. It's a site soaked in the blood of tens of thousands because it has possibly never seen more battles than just about any other place in world history.

Today Megiddo is a significant archaeological site and I remember visiting this mysterious, eerie place a few years ago when touring the Holy Land.

Megiddo lies near the entrance to a mountain pass adjacent to Mt Carmel on the fertile Valley of Jezreel. It has, historically, been of strategic importance as it commanded the crossroads of the ancient world. Here Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome and then the Western Powers and the Islamic world all competed for supremacy.

The first known battle dates from the Early Bronze Age when the Egyptian Pharaoh invaded the region. Then 1469 BC another Pharaoh took on a coalition of Syrian forces in Megiddo. The next most significant battle took place in 609 BC when the King of Judah, Josiah, went into battle against the Egyptians, only to be killed in the bloody conflict.

The Romans maintained a garrison of 5,000 in Megiddo around the time of Christ and in more recent times, Allied forces took on the Ottoman Empire here in 1918 under General Edmund Allenby.

The Israeli's maintained a defence base near Megiddo until recently while Megiddo is probably most well known because of a reference in the Book of Revelation. This reference describes it as the location where a tumultuous final battle will one day take place heralding the end of world history. Here, in the battle of Armageddon, the Lord will take on the Adversary in a gigantic struggle that will see scores settled and the righteous triumph.

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This is pretty heavy stuff and it's not the most popular sermon topic. For many people, the very mention of Armageddon and the end of the world casts a real sense of fear and trepidation. Indeed, the idea of God being a mighty warrior whose intention is to slaughter Satan on the battlefield really doesn't gel for many of us these days.

But the impact of Megiddo and the idea of Armageddon does have significant bearing on the history of God's people. And today's reading from Jeremiah is no exception. Indeed, to be truthful I feel I need to almost apologize for having read this passage from Jeremiah this morning because it's quiet harrowing. There is not a lot of good news in it. But bear with me!

In today's passage the prophet Jeremiah proclaims doom. Judah's King has been slaughtered on the battle field in Megiddo. Josiah was known for his progressive reforms and up until his untimely death the nation had prospered during a period of peace and prosperity.

But with Josiah's death came a string of incompetent kings who foolishly play politics with neighbouring superpowers. This led to the specific situation to which Jeremiah speaks. And that situation involves the imminent invasion and the brutal destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian tyrant, Nebuchadnezzar.

The events that followed King Josiah's death saw the superpower, Babylon, invade and subsequently destroy Jerusalem in 586 BC. This event amounted to a complete catastrophe for God's people as Solomon's magnificent temple was burnt to the ground and Jerusalem's inhabitants were either slaughtered or carried off into exile in a strange land.

So, today's reading from Jeremiah centers on a brutal, bloody catastrophe that is about to happen. Here thousands will be slaughtered while things that are held to be precious and sacred will desecrated, defiled and consigned to dustbins of history. It's an awful scenario!

Such a prospect probably sounds a little foreign or perhaps rather irrelevant to us today. However, we, too, live in a dangerous, menacing world.

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Threats concerning terror are very real and things like “border security” and the protection of Australia’s national interest together with the vast allocation of funds to upgrade Australia’s defence capability all maintain a high priority on the national agenda.

Here there is a kind of “invasion anxiety” among many Australians as we fear those beyond our shores, whether the threats are real or not.

Jeremiah’s words paint a dismal picture for his day. The prophet sees no way out. He pauses for a moment and asks the question “where is God in all of this”? And Jeremiah comes to the conclusion that things are too far gone. God’s people are doomed!

Friends, I could simply stop here and we could all go home with very heavy hearts. For, at this point the future of the world according to Jeremiah lies on the battle field of defeat.

We are all losers - well at least until that final Battle of Armageddon takes place when, according to the Book of Revelation, the Lord will settle the score with Satan.

Now, this is what some more fundamentalist Christian groups proclaim. And such a viewpoint has become the preoccupation of many religious sects and cults. It’s an outlook shrouded in fear and remorse. And it makes for some pretty depressing reading.

But a closer look at the text of Jeremiah reveals something quite interesting. Here I refer to the “pathos of God”. In other words, in Jeremiah’s doom and gloom there is a strong sense of pity and grief. Indeed, in Jeremiah’s ranting and raving there is a profound degree of feeling and a heightened sense of emotion concerning what is about to happen.

For, inevitable as it may seem, what is about to take place has a real impact on the great prophet.

And here Jeremiah is grieved. Jeremiah mourns. Jeremiah is moved to tears.

Friends, while there is condemnation at one level, especially since God’s people have brought this disaster upon themselves, there is also a profound sense of sorrow, regret and distress.

There is an articulation of the tragic here as Jeremiah really does care about what’s going to happen to his people. There is an expression of solitude, tenderness and empathy as Jeremiah laments the coming destruction of his people.



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And many believe this grief, this sorrow, this regret and this tenderness is not just an expression of the prophet. It's an authentic expression of God. For, in the Bible, God is presented as a God quite capable and more than willing to express vital human emotions including sorrow, joy and grief when it comes to the plight of God's people.

We see this in the Psalms and we see it in the witness of other prophets, for example in Hosea where God grieves over a people who are likened to an adulterous nation. And we see it in Isaiah when this great prophet speaks of God's "suffering servant".

Importantly we see this in Jesus, God's Son, as Jesus weeps when he receives news about the death of his dear friend Lazarus. We see this as Jesus weeps over Jerusalem and as Jesus agonises in the Garden of Gethsemane. Indeed we see this as Jesus suffers on the cross for our sake.



What all this says is this. In wake of disaster and in the wake of the many catastrophes that plague us, God is not a remote observer. God is not a clinical practitioner. God is not a distant bystander. God is not an absentee father. Rather, as God's people suffer through various faults of their own or because of simple fate itself, God is moved, God is concerned. God grieves and God weeps for God's people.

The great German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, writes about this in the context of his country's involvement in the Second World War and Kazo Kitamori does likewise in terms of Japan's experience, firstly as an aggressive nation that went to war and then as a nation humiliated and brought to its knees after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

What these and other Christian writers say is this - God is present, God is engaged, God is moved. Indeed, God is grieved - when God's people suffer.

The recent Hungarian movie, Son of Saul, focuses on the Nazi extermination camp in Auschwitz. Here Saul, a Jewish prisoner is made part of the Sonderkommando, a group of prisoners who were forced to work in the extermination camps. Saul and his colleagues managed day-to-day business by herding bewildered prisoners out of trains and up to the very doors of the gas chambers and afterwards removing their bodies. The story is a powerful one involving Saul's attempt to bury, according to Jewish custom, the body of a little boy who initially survives the gas chambers.

In an interview after the release of this powerful film, Geza Rohrig, the actor who plays Saul speaks about his own faith and the confronting nature of the movie role he takes. Geza goes to say:

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"It wasn't God who rounded up the Jews and the Gypsies and the Soviet PoWs and the gays and mental patients and slaughtered them. We did it. The human family did it. I do not for one nanosecond like to pretend that God is off the hook. He could and should have stopped it at a much earlier stage. But I would not be able to get up from my bed in the morning, let alone pray, if I didn't fully believe that God somehow was there holding the hands of each and every Jew in the gas chamber - each and every Tutsi, Armenian, Kurd, Israeli, Palestinian who suffers unjustly."

So, you see, in the wake of trouble, in the shadow of disappointment, in the despondency of failure, in the despair of illness and death, God doesn't walk away from us. God doesn't abandon us. Rather, God is there in the thick of it - for each and every one of us!

Friends, here, God grieves, God weeps, dare I say, God suffers. And this no better understood than it is in these simple yet such profound words that I ask you all to never forget:

"For God so loved the world" - for God loved the world in SUCH A WAY - for God loved the world SO MUCH - "that he gave his only Son".

In so doing God entered into our suffering, God took on our fears, God experienced our failures and God passionately took upon himself our "stuff-ups" - so that each one of us can find a way through what so often appears to be a complete dead end in our lives.

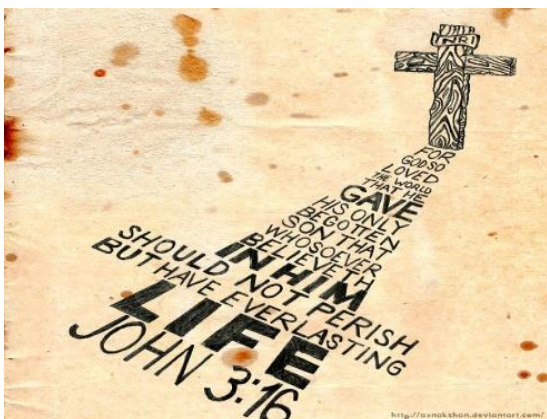
And that, my friends, is Good News!

In the wake of all that Jeremiah pronounces, in view of Jeremiah's doom and gloom, indeed, in the context of so much confusion, uncertainty and despair - there IS more - there IS a way forward!

For, you see, God is always there for you and God is always there for me. Disillusion, failure, defeat and death never have the last say.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do remember this and do live it - for I assure you - it's true!

Thanks be to God!



John Barr