



**Jeremiah 29.1, 4-7**  
**Luke 17.11-19**  
**9<sup>th</sup> October 2016**

## Finding God in Plan B

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*Gracious God – may your Living Word come to us afresh this morning – so touch, we pray our minds and hearts with your grace and truth – through Christ our Lord and in the power of your Spirit. Amen*

The Prime Minister was grilled on Radio 4's TODAY programme last Tuesday as part of its coverage of the Conservative Party conference at Birmingham.

Nick Robinson was terrier like in his inquisition yet remarked that Mrs May left the studio with a broad smile on her face – I suspect it was probably one of relief.

As I listened over the cornflakes the thing that struck me most was the analysis afterwards which noted, perhaps rather obviously, that 100 days ago Teresa May probably thought by October this year she would still be Home Secretary – the longest serving one in modern history. Yet June 23<sup>rd</sup> and the Brexit vote changed everything and what has happened since wasn't Plan A for many politicians.

Plan B's can develop remarkably quickly. Everything seems to be going fine and on course one minute but then a single phone call can turn our world upside down and suddenly, unexpectedly yet with no possibility of going back, we are on Plan B.

That happens so often to so many people that it is hardly unique and definitely not uncommon. Yet we always seem shocked, even angered, that the best laid plans of 'mice and men' can so quickly turn to dust.

I think there is something of a Plan B element in both lectionary readings this morning. A sense that maybe this isn't the way life should have turned out – and yet – maybe God can be as much in Plan B as we think he might have been in Plan A.

Our reading from the Jewish scriptures takes us to the words of Jeremiah.

It's some six centuries until the birth of Jesus – so this is really pre-history. In Britain this was the early Iron Age and the time of the Druids – this is sketchy history based more on archaeology than on written records.

But we know a fair bit about the world of Jeremiah. We know that Nebuchadnezzar was the aggressive king of Babylon with a vendetta against Israel. We know that thousands of Jews had been taken by the king's army back to Babylon where they sat by its rivers and wept. We know that a few years later another army attacked Israel's capital city this time raising it to the ground.

So, in short we know these were the days of Plan B.

This isn't the way history was meant to unfold. As Jeremiah wrote these words in 597BC this was the start of what seemed like a long seventy years of silence from heaven. These were years when the presence of God came across as absent. Years of abandonment.

Maybe we can almost feel the longing as families sat down for the Shabbat meal and read of the old days when God made himself present through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When that divine presence was celebrated by the placing of the Arc of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies at the very centre of Jerusalem's temple.

But those days were well and truly gone. The lights had gone out and the temple had been ransacked – these were the days of Plan B.

Kierkegaard, that Danish priest come philosopher once said, *Life can only be understood backwards yet it needs to be lived forwards*. So we know, because we have stories like Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, that eventually this time in exile would come to an end for the Israelites. As they sat by the waters of Babylon and wept this wasn't to be their end game. But all of this was years down the line – it was sort of promised by their prophets and sages but very much part of their 'not yet' future.

So what do you do with faith when Plan A has slipped through your fingers?

Well Jeremiah, in chapter 29, had three pieces of advice:

Build Houses  
Plant Gardens  
Marry Wives

If Kierkegaard's one liners have found their way onto modern day fridge magnets, Jeremiah's three-fold plan was surely worthy of a terracotta plaque in any exiled Jewish kitchen in Babylon. Build Houses. Plant Gardens and Marry Wives.

It was a call to start living again.

But the interesting thing, it seems to me, is just how strong this call was. Read Jeremiah 29 and it doesn't really feel like a Plan B at all because by verse 7 we have these wonderful words: *Seek the welfare of any city to which I have exiled you, and pray to the Lord for it; on its welfare your welfare will depend*.

So let's get this straight. These readers and hearers of Jeremiah have become exiles and have lost so much of their identity with the destruction of their temple back home. This might have been a moment when belief and faith crumbled just like those falling walls of Jerusalem. Instead Jeremiah challenges them to sense the presence of God in so much of Plan B that they actually now start praying for God's blessing to rest upon Babylon.

This is an amazing journey to be on – it's a journey where self-pity never gets the upper hand and faith finds fresh horizons.

One of my minister friends has a phrase for it – she simply says 'Stuff Happens' – life rarely turns out the way we might want, we are often forced to take the fork in the road we never anticipated – yet faith doesn't have to end when Plan A goes pear shaped.

A few Saturdays ago I went over to Coleshill Village Hall for the Induction of Rabbi Charley. The service lasted a full two hours because the first half was the usual Saturday liturgy. I couldn't help but notice the set prayers on the order of service for the British Royal Family and national Parliament.

You'd find that in any Synagogue service in the world – every Saturday our Jewish friends pray for the President, King or Prime Minister of the country where they live. It's part of their liturgical DNA and it comes directly from verses like this one in Jeremiah 29: *Seek the welfare of the city...*

It also formed the main theme of the Chief Rabbi's sermon that morning as he urged members of the South Bucks Liberal Jewish Congregation not only to work hard for the renewal of their internal life together but to strive to play a full and meaningful part in modern day British society.

How would you have felt in Babylon? Robbed of your homeland, never again to worship in the temple. There was obviously a time to sit down by the waters and weep – for lament is also a valid expression of faith. But after the weeping, says Jeremiah, Build Houses, Plant Gardens, Marry Wives and pray for

the city. Because God is also part of Plan B.

I sometimes wonder how prescriptive we are when it comes to sensing God's presence in our lives or discerning the touch of the divine upon life's path.

I grew up in a church with a tradition that said some things were definitely the will of God whilst other things definitely weren't. People even made their diaries provisional saying let's meet for lunch next Thursday DV – that's the Latin for Deo Volente – meaning God Willing.

I now take a much more pragmatic view. Strikes me we can honour both God and neighbour in a multitude of ways. And there are many paths in life open to me – no just one. And actually the idea that I might miss the road set for me by God and spend the rest of my life parked on a spiritual M25 going nowhere because I turned right at Chorleywood instead of turning left and then taking the M1 up to Yorkshire frankly makes life meaningless.

Life is full of choices and any sense that the will of God for us is locked up in some pre-destined way is a simple abdication of responsibility on our part.

God's will is surely that in any and every situation we seek the way of love and justice.

The same is true, I suspect, of a cause and effect understanding of faith.

This sort of insurance spirituality says – if I say my prayers and go to church then God will protect and bless me. It's the reason why people say things like – my friend was such a good person they didn't deserve to be made redundant or have a stroke.

It's the idea that Plan A can be achieved because if I keep my side of the bargain surely God is honour bound to keep his.

Yet Bonhoeffer – one of the most significant and inspiring Christian leaders of the twentieth century - was executed at Flossenburg in April 1945 just two weeks before that concentration camp was liberated by American troops. Do we think God somehow got it all terribly wrong?

That cause and effect spirituality just doesn't work – belief and faith are not insurance policies against the knocks of life – they don't prevent them they rather enable us to greet them with fortitude, courage and a longer view.

Time for us now I think to meet some people who knew a thing or two about life's hard knocks – the ten lepers of Luke 17.

Their condition was so contagious that life in society was simply no longer possible and so they also knew a thing or two about exile.

Just after Easter this year we visited the island of Spinalonga off the coast of Crete and made famous by the novel about leprosy by Victoria Hislop. This small, small island, tantalisingly in sight of the mainland was a leper colony up until the 1930s. People were exiled here for a lifetime often within sight of their homes and families just half a mile away across the other side of the water.

And, says Doctor Luke, Jesus brings healing and wholeness to these ten dejected and isolated outcasts. He sends them to the priest who would then have declared these lepers cured and whose word would have power to re-admit them back into society. Yet – as Shakespeare might have said, *here's the rub*, just one of them comes back to say thank you.

So is this just a story of the value of gratitude? It's an obvious lesson to draw out of the narrative and surely a favourite of every parent and Junior Church teacher – the value of saying thank you.

But, is that all its about?

I suspect the message here is: This doesn't feel like Plan A. God is so obviously at work as ten people on the margins are welcomed home – God is so obviously at work here as wholeness replaces debilitating weakness – yet surely it simply cannot be a Plan A moment because these healed lepers – one of whom shows grateful thanks - were Samaritans rather than Jews. Shock, horror!

Faith and religion gets ugly when it gets exclusive. So it wasn't James' and John's finest moment when they visited a Samaritan village only to ask God to rain down fire upon it.

Of course the history between the Jews and Samaritans was complicated – years ago they had been a single nation but they split apart because of a different way of interpreting the Torah.

So just like the story of the Good Samaritan – the tale of the Grateful Leper has a hero from the wrong side of the street. That's why it feels like Plan B – because it wasn't meant to be like this – as one commentator has put it – when that one leper came back to Jesus to give thanks what we have is the right sort of worship offered up by the wrong sort of worshipper.

Yet time and again this is how the gospel story unfolds. Jesus is rejected by the religious hierarchy of his day – no welcome for him in synagogues where he preached a radical message or in the temple as he attacked internal corruption. So many 'A list' people didn't give Jesus a chance – instead his message was listened to and his call responded to much more by those of the 'B list'.

Surely the essence of today's gospel reading is that we become less and less prescriptive about our understanding of God at work in the world.

We might expect the presence and activity of the divine here in church, and praise God that is hopefully often the case – but God is never limited to a sacred building and the presence of the Holy Spirit is limitless – to be experienced in schools, offices, prisons and community centres.

We might expect God to speak to us in the bible, and praise God that is often the case – but we might also detect that divine whisper reading a novel, listening to music, watching a play or talking with a friend.

We might have expected God to meet us in the joys of family life or a seamless progression through our job's career structure – and maybe that has been your experience – yet who of us hasn't been touched by family difficulties or workplace frustrations – and to our surprise God has also met us there.

Maybe Jesus expected that his message of love and justice would have been welcomed by synagogue worshippers and the priests at the temple – and to be sure some did accept that message like Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea – yet as these three years of preaching and teaching unfolded it became clear that just as many, if not more, from outside Jesus' cultural and religious background were responding favourably to his call – Samaritans, Roman centurions and people with a past that made them hide in the shadows.

This week – just maybe – we too will meet God in:

The Wrong Place  
The Wrong Liturgy  
The Wrong Faith  
The Wrong People

and as we do so – just maybe the Holy Spirit is teaching us that Plan B's are not so bad after all.

May it be so in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, 7th October 2016*