

## To Break Down or Build - Reflection

### *Jeremiah 1:4-10*

The prophet Jeremiah lived in some rather “interesting” times. From the highs early in his ministry of Josiah’s reforms, to the lows of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem and subsequent exile, Jeremiah saw it all. For more than forty years, Jeremiah preached and called people back to God, reminding them of the covenant and what it meant, to both challenge them and bring comfort.

This challenging and bringing comfort was probably also the aim of the redactors who updated and added bits to Jeremiah’s preaching for their own audiences over the next 150 years or so. These were the generations that struggled with the exile and the impact of the return.

It is significant that Jeremiah’s call is related right at the start of this book and not part way through, as is often the case. It tells us that Jeremiah started working before the great reforms, albeit during the time of a sympathetic king. Despite this, Jeremiah sees the start of his prophecy about warning the people of the consequences of failing to live by the covenant. As we will hear next week, the threat from the north, which had, 100 years before, wiped out the kingdom of Israel, has come back in a new guise.

As we hear Jeremiah’s call, we hear one of the more typical objections, namely that he is too young. We shouldn’t take him too literally at being a boy, remembering as well that boys became men at the age of 12. Basically, Jeremiah here is asking why, in a society where age is respected as a sign of wisdom, people should listen to what he has to say.

And what does he have to say? As we hear the start of his preaching, it seems like this is about plucking up and pulling down; destroying and over throwing. Calling a list of woes a “jeremiad” comes from the life and preaching of this prophet. Yet, it is to Jeremiah that later redactors turn to give people hope: the building and planting.

At the end of next month we will hear words of comfort from his “book of consolation,” probably added by a later writer for people to hear when they had experienced the worst they could imagine. In those words, as well as others, we will hear Jeremiah building and planting a new future for those who are struggling.

This all raises an important question: how do we know when it is time to tear down when to build? The educator and activist, Cesar Cruz says that “art should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed,” which is a sentiment shared by Banksy. I have also heard that phrase used by people talking about the Christian message and the task of preaching.

Where are we? Comfortable or disturbed? And what is it that we most need at this time – tearing down or building up?

Over the last two and a half years, we have been exploring how we are the church for our time and place. We have reevaluated



Banksy, Girl with Balloon

much of what we thought it meant to be church in the past and reflected on what is really is the core to our faith (and what is simply tradition). Together we have come to the realisation that old models no longer work, not because there was anything wrong with them in their time, but because our society has changed and new models are needed. We have even explored how the church, right from the earliest days, has always found culturally appropriate ways to share the Good News with the people they encounter.

Fairly early in my time here I shared that one of the differences between transition and change is the time in the middle – the time of exile. This is a time when we have left the old, but are not yet ready to look to the new. I think we are coming to the end of that time of exile, and in this calendar year, we have started two programmes that each of which could be developed into connecting to our wider community and developing a faith community for those people. This is a big step and well worth celebrating. Here we are building, planting, putting down new roots, and looking to our new future.

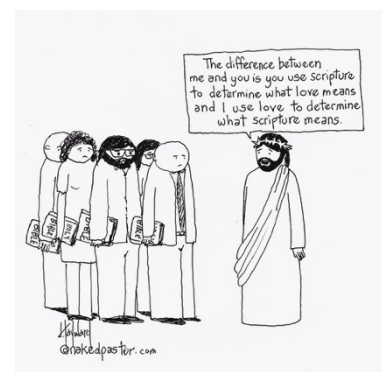
In the next month or two, we will be exploring (and getting feedback) on our draft mission plan before the Church Council and Presbytery approve it and people will be encouraged to reflect on which parts of that plan they might be called to support.

And as we move forward into this new future, there are probably a few feelings similar to those first readers of Jeremiah – we have an idea what it will be like, but reality still needs to be rebuilt.

### *Luke 13:10-17*

It is apt, therefore, that our Jeremiah reading is paired with today's Gospel reading. In this story, Jesus is doing his own bit of tearing down and building up. The restrictive rules that were developed, albeit with good intentions, have had a harmful effect on some of the marginalised peoples in the community, and Jesus calls it out for what it is. Rules and traditions may well be helpful for some people in the community, but when they get in the way of other people's relationship with God, then they need to be reconsidered.

As we look towards a time of planting and building, it is worth considering how this Gospel reading might be retold if it was written for our congregation today. Who are the "insiders" of our community who need to hear a challenge? Who are the outsiders in our community who are excluded? What are our traditions that are keeping people from truly knowing they are the beloved of God?



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