

Reflection for Pentecost 11 - Sunday August 21st 2022 by Megan Cambridge

“Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy”. But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’, for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD” (Jeremiah 1:4-8).

Jeremiah, is frightened of opening his mouth which reminds me of another of God’s prophets, prophet, Moses, when he encounters the burning bush. Moses is eighty years old, he’s helping out as a shepherd when he sees a burning bush and goes to look. God speaks to him telling him to go and tell Pharaoh to let His people go. Moses offers all kinds of excuses: “Who am I, that I should go talk to Pharaoh?” “If they ask me ‘Which god?’, what shall I say?” “Suppose they don’t believe me?”. Then, eventually, he blurts out the real reason: “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Exodus 4:10). In other words, “I do not know how to speak!” Moses too is frightened of opening his mouth. It’s an understandable response, isn’t it? I think most of us range from reluctant to frightened of opening our mouths and talking to other people about our faith. “What if I get it wrong? What if they reject me? What if I make them angry? What if I somehow offend them? Scariest of all, what if I discover that I’m really not sure what I believe anyway?”

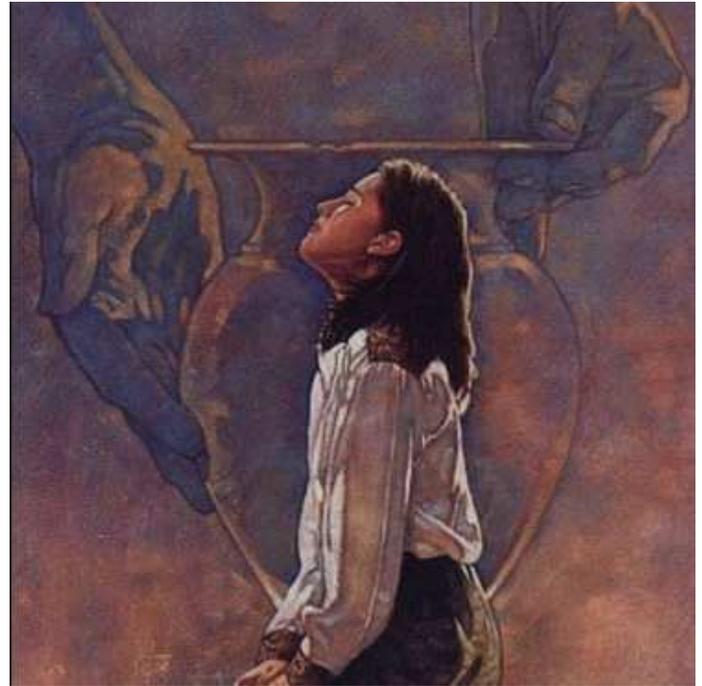
Young or old, it’s the same problem. Moses is an old man, in his eighties. Jeremiah is a young man; he calls himself a ‘boy’. When you are young you look at all the people around you and they look self-assured, so confident, so intimidating and then look inside yourself, all you can feel is fear; “I’m just a child! How can I possibly speak to them? I don’t know anything, and they know everything!” When we are young, we think that it’s just a young person’s problem but as we get older, we realize that it’s not about age, because we still feel it; it’s about confidence. When it comes to speaking about the things of God, it’s about confidence in God.

In our Old Testament reading God is not accepting Jeremiah’s excuse about his age He knows that Jeremiah is qualified for this task. Jeremiah is indeed able to do this work, not because of who Jeremiah is, not on the basis of what Jeremiah can do, not because Jeremiah knows all the answers and has all the right words. Instead, Jeremiah is qualified because of who God is. Jeremiah is able because God is able. God's faithfulness empowers and equips us to respond to His call. Called to speak in God’s name? Yes, that’s our call – you and me. We might not know how to respond to that call and might not feel qualified but if we are willing, God is willing. Then there's no limit to what God can accomplish through us.

e may use our situations as reasons why we cannot step up but let’s look a moment at the situation Jeremiah lived in. He was born in the village of Anathoth, three miles from Jerusalem. He was from a priestly family and was probably in training to be a priest himself.

Jeremiah lived in a scary time in the history of God’s Old Testament people. He began his ministry as a prophet around 626 B.C., during the reign of King Josiah, a good king who tried to encourage his people to turn away from idols and worship the one true God of Israel. These were also times of political upheaval. At that time there were three great superpowers – Egypt to the south, Assyria to the north and Babylon to the east. Before the time of Jeremiah, the Assyrians had destroyed the northern Kingdom of Israel and taken the people into exile. All that was left now was the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin that made up the southern kingdom, Judah, centred on Jerusalem.

During the forty or so years of Jeremiah's ministry, there were several invasions from Assyria and Babylon. King Josiah was killed in battle and Israel became a vassal state of Babylon; it rebelled twice, and each rebellion was put down with brutal force. After the second rebellion, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, burned its temple and palaces to the ground, broke down its walls and took all its leaders and ruling classes away to exile in Babylon. However, Jeremiah ended up in Egypt.



That was the world that Jeremiah lived in. God didn't call Jeremiah to be a prophet in a nice peaceful time when the churches were full and the word of God was popular. Far from it. God called Jeremiah to speak for him in hard times, when people were more concerned with surviving brutal wars and picking which superpower to support. Jeremiah was telling the people this was the wrong question and that the right question was not which superpower to support, but which god was the true God. This is what God was saying through Jeremiah: "And I will utter my judgements against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the work of their own hands" (1:16).

It seems today for a lot of people, particularly in the developed world, we are still worshipping the work of our own hands; thinking that the things we make for ourselves or buy for ourselves are the things that can make us happy. That wasn't a popular message in Jeremiah's time. In fact, Jeremiah was not successful. Maybe some people listened to him, but not many, certainly not enough to change the course of history. The majority continued to worship idols and follow wicked rulers and the result was the exile. Jeremiah failed. Or did he? After all, we don't have too many writings left from King Nebuchadnezzar, but over two thousand six hundred years later we are still reading the words of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah never really got over his fear (we can read his words to that effect in his book) still, he did what God asked him to do. He spoke the word of God faithfully, and in the end, that's what God asks of us – faithfulness. We may not all be called to be prophets but we are all called to speak God's word faithfully. What does faithfulness mean to us today and how are we to apply this to our lives?

Jesus told his followers that they would be his witnesses 'in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). We are part of that church, so that commission is given to us too. By our words and actions, we are called to spread the message of Jesus and invite people to be his followers. We are also called to speak in the name of Jesus to challenge injustice and oppression and violence and hatred. These are not the values of the Kingdom of God; the Kingdom of God is about justice and compassion and peace and love. In the name of Jesus, we are called to spread that message and do what we can to promote it in the messy world we live in.

Regardless of our age God calls us to do His work and, regardless of our age, our first thought might well be to say "I can't". God in his grace reassures us that what we do will bring blessing to others. In His eyes we are the best person for the job.