

Where is God in a crisis?

Haven't we had wonderful weather. Gardens are at their best and I'm sure some of us will be wanting a bit of rain to water the gardens – It will come soon. When I was away I loved the amazing scenery that we have here in Scotland. From East to West, it is simply incredible, and something to be proud of.

Jesus loved nature, many of his parables were about nature. He spoke of the wild flowers, telling people to study them. He said that these flowers do not labour and weave but they are even classier than King Solomon. If that is how God clothes flowers, which are here today and gone tomorrow, he said, then how much more richly will he clothe you.

Jesus does not promise that everything in life will come up smelling of roses. If that's what we think being a Christian is all about then we are in for a shock. Throughout the world today Christians are hungry, thirsty, persecuted, suffer and face tragedy. What Jesus has in mind is that God is able to meet all our spiritual needs, and that he clothes us with real and lasting blessings.

Yes, we too, like the flowers of the field will be here today and gone tomorrow, but the hope of the Christian faith is that after this life, God will clothe our mortal bodies with immortal bodies.

This is the hope that we have as Christians – not just after life but he will clothe us here and now, he will clothe us with strength.

Jeremiah was known as the Weeping Prophet. His ministry was difficult and hard. When God called him, as a young man, God gave him this charge, *"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations"* - Jeremiah 1:5...*"You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you."*

So his ministry began brightly but not so much later, God said to him. *"You will tell them all these things, but they will not listen to you; you will challenge them, but they will not give you a hearing."* Jeremiah 7:27

What minister today would want a charge like Jeremiah? Imagine someone inducted to a new charge – perhaps their first charge, and this is what he hears from the Moderator. *"You will tell them all these things, but they will not listen to you; you will challenge them, but they will not give you a hearing."* I think most ministers would run in the opposite direction.

If we are honest, we all want a trouble-free life, a life that has no problems and challenges. Who wants a path of thorns?

But the reality is the Christian life is often a thorny life, a narrow way, and it was on a thorny path and narrow way that he was called to walk.

Jeremiah was born at a time when Israel was in a crisis – Egypt was pressuring them from the south and Babylon from the north, so they were sandwiched between these two great powers. Furthermore, their religious institution had become introverted, and they had lost sight of what being God's people really meant.

The message that Jeremiah had from God or his people was this, *“Obey me, and I will be your God, and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you”* – 7:23

So, Jeremiah went forward, knowing that his ministry, humanly speaking, was doomed to fail – destruction was coming. Everything was against him. He was like the man who tried to stop the tide coming in.

But did that deter him? Not in the slightest, he carried on regardless in the hope that one or two might hear and respond. He had the courage to accept “human failure” and not to be deflected from the path that God called him to. No matter how difficult it was.

What was his secret?

God clothed him with strength.

When God called Jeremiah he also equipped him, Jer. 1:17-19...

Jeremiah 1:17-19 ¹⁷*“Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. ¹⁸Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land- against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. ¹⁹They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,”* declares the LORD.

How did it all end up for Jeremiah? Not very well! He was eventually put down a well and left to die. They couldn't listen to Jeremiah any longer, so they decided to get rid of him.

Sounds familiar!

Wasn't there another Jew 700 years later than Jeremiah, who they refused to also listen to, and decided to put on a cross to shut him up.

Why am I sharing this?

Well, at this present time, the Church of Scotland is in many ways facing a crisis, facing immense pressures. To many people, it would look like the church is failing. Reduction of ministries, falling finances, churches merging, lack of young people and the picture,

humanly speaking is bleak, but what is God doing in all of this, just as he was doing at the time of Jeremiah and Jesus, God is preparing a people to rise again.

Yes, the Jews were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon, just as Jeremiah prophesied would happen. Yes, Jesus died on a cross, as he prophesied, and his earthly life ended.

But Jeremiah and Jesus were people who lived in hope. They saw beyond the present situation to a coming age. They found strength and hope in God.

Jeremiah said, "The days are coming declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David, a righteous branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called; The Lord our righteous Saviour."

Jeremiah pointed to the coming of Christ, our Saviour.

Also, after the life and death of Jeremiah, God raised his people again, and 70 years later took them from Babylon to rebuild the walls and the Temple of Jerusalem. After the cross, God raised Christ from the dead, and he brought his Kingdom into existence through the followers of Jesus. A fulfilment of the prophesy of Jeremiah.

It seems to be how God works. Something old dies and new life appears.

Is God doing something new in our time?

Yes, most definitely, He is at work, and He is preparing his people to rise again, and to go forward in faith.

So, in the face of all the challenges that we face as a church and perhaps you are facing individually, the message from Jeremiah and Jesus is to keep trusting, keep looking to the Lord, and like Jeremiah and Jesus, stay faithful, believing that God is not finished with us yet...He is only beginning.

Find your strength in God, let him clothe you. Paul used the analogy of armour for the battle and that God will give us his armour.

The armour of God...Ephesians 6:12-17.

¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

I admire Christians today who willingly face persecution for their faith in Christ and who stand strong and keep on believing despite all the challenges that they face to compromise and to give up. They have chosen the Jeremiah and the Jesus way.

Time and time again, the story of the persecuted church is a story of standing strong in the storm and in a crisis, firmly trusting in God. One persecuted Iraqi Christian, who lost his home when the so-called Islamic State took control, said, *"People always ask us where was God when we were displaced? But we witness the hand of God with us all the time...we don't focus our mind on what we lost but on what God did for us..."*

That's a great spirit to have in the midst of a crisis, to keep seeing God in the crisis and that he is at work. Paul the Apostle wrote that all things work together for the good to those who love God.

God is working out his purpose and plan for our lives, even when times are hard.

Part of my holiday this year was to spend time with my mum. These were real times of blessings. Her health has been poorly and she has struggled greatly, and over the last few weeks her health took a nose dive and she has ended up in hospital. But it was a great privilege to be there with her over this time. In the midst of the crisis I was to see genuine love and care; the remarkable care and attention that she received from her carers, who have been coming in four times a day, brought home to me the way that God works through people in a time of crisis. That care from these young women gave my mum the strength to cope. Yes, like the flowers of the field, God clothes us with spiritual blessings in human ways.

Even Adam and Eve, despite their wickedness and defiance of God, left the garden in shame but God still clothed them. When the prodigal returned home, what did God do? He gave him a robe, he clothed him. That is our God, always willing to clothe us and give us new strength.

Where is God in the midst of your crisis? He is right here, working through carers, nurses and doctors and consultants and many others. God is at work and it's good to recognise this.

God has not given up on us. He works in many ways and his church takes different forms and so as we go forward, let us look for a God that brings new life, order out of chaos, a God who is in the chaos with us and a God who has triumphed over sin and death and a God who clothes us in his strength.

That is the hope that we have as Christians.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Amen.