

Date: 17th July 2011

Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Jeremiah 28:1-17

Background to the reading

Our reading is historically significant because it tells the final history of the kingdom of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim invaded Judah, and carried away some royal youths, including Daniel and his companions together with the sacred vessels of the temple. In 598 BC in the beginning of Jehoiachin's reign, Nebuchadnezzar carried away captive 3,023 eminent Jews, including the king with his family and officers and a large number of warriors with very many persons of note, leaving behind only those who were poor and helpless. This was the first general deportation to Babylon. The Babylonian emperor placed Zedekiah as a puppet ruler on the throne of Judah.

In spite of the repeated warnings and criticisms of the prophet Jeremiah, reported in the narratives of Jeremiah, Zedekiah rebelled against his Babylonian overlords. In the year 586/7 BC the Babylonians came and recaptured Jerusalem. The whole of Jerusalem was flattened to the ground and a bereaved and maimed Zedekiah was taken in chains to Babylon. The Babylonians took most of the population in exile to Babylonia and the rest of the sacred vessels in the temple.

From this period, when the temple was destroyed to the complete restoration, is the period of the "seventy years."

Jeremiah says in chapter 27 to king Zedekiah: "Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people, and you will live." Unfortunately there were other people who thought they were "prophets of the Lord" and said the opposite. In chapter 27 Jeremiah went even so far as to convince the king and the other ambassadors that he was indeed speaking on behalf of God that he carried a yoke around his neck symbolizing the oppression, the hardship they were facing and that Judah should submit to Babylon.

But in chapter 28 Jeremiah got a lot of opposition through someone called Hananiah, who claimed to be a prophet. He is not mentioned elsewhere in the OT and we do not know anything about him. His name, a common one in ancient Israel, means *The Lord has been gracious*. Hananiah is identified as the son of an otherwise unknown Azzur from Gibeon. Gibeon was located in the territory of Benjamin, as was Jeremiah's hometown, Anathoth. It was one of the priests' cities, which suggests that Hananiah may himself have been a priest. If so, his credibility as a prophet would have been enhanced because of his priestly status.

Hananiah confronted Jeremiah in the temple in the presence of priests and a number of people. He began to speak to him. The bold language and demeanor of Hananiah raises a question, "Was he sincere though self-deceived, or was he deliberately pretending to be a prophet of God?" In support of his sincerity, he contradicted Jeremiah's warnings with a show of authority. He boldly used the same introductory

formula as Jeremiah: “This is what the Lord . . . says.” Furthermore, he was called a prophet, just as was Jeremiah. When he announced “I will break the yoke,” he used the prophetic perfect (also called the perfect of certainty) and thus his statement could be translated, “I have broken the yoke”.

Moreover, Hananiah set definite dates (“two years”) and used specific names. He confidently broke the yoke worn by Jeremiah and announced that Babylon’s domination was soon coming to an end. To risk such exactness of words and actions would seem unlikely if he wanted to protect himself by stating his predictions in more vague language. Hananiah may have been emboldened to make his predictions because of turmoil in Babylon. The Babylonian Chronicles indicate that Nebuchadnezzar was putting down a revolt in Babylon at that time. His preoccupation with troubles elsewhere may have encouraged Hananiah’s optimistic belief of imminent return of the exiles. It is probable, therefore, that Hananiah thought of himself as a real prophet of God.

Jeremiah understood that Hananiah was challenging his authority as a prophet. His response, “Amen!” [which occurs elsewhere in Jeremiah only in 11:5] “May the Lord do so!” has been interpreted by many scholars as a sarcastic response, but Jeremiah was sincere. He did not defend himself or challenge Hananiah by saying, “You are lying,” as might be expected. Because of his love for his people, he hoped that Hananiah was correct. However, Hananiah’s prophecy must have caused Jeremiah to wonder if the Lord had bypassed him. He did not presumptuously assume that he was the only one who could speak for God.

Jeremiah reminded Hananiah that other prophets before them had prophesied “war, disaster, and plague.” Such messages were not popular. The people preferred to hear reassuring words and paid those prophets who spoke what they wanted to hear. Jeremiah reminded Hananiah that one who preached peace would be vindicated as a prophet only if his predictions came true. Jeremiah must have had in mind the fulfillment test of Deuteronomy 18:20–22, the best evidence of the truthfulness of a prophet’s predictions. In the contest between Jeremiah and Hananiah, time would tell which prophet was right.

Emboldened by Jeremiah’s reluctance to challenge him, Hananiah proceeded to perform his own symbolic act. He removed the yoke from Jeremiah’s neck and broke it in the presence of the people. His purpose was to nullify Jeremiah’s symbolic act by counteracting it with another. By means of his symbolic act, Hananiah announced that the Lord was going to break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar from all the nations. Then he added a specific time for fulfillment—“within two years.” His bold words would incite those who wanted to rebel against their Babylonian masters. They would also encourage those who refused to settle down in Babylon because they believed they would return home soon.

We are not told how much time elapsed before the Lord’s reassurance came to Jeremiah. It is important to observe that the text never says that the word of the Lord came to Hananiah, but it did come to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah received God's promise once again that he would be present with Jeremiah, and deliverance was assured. The Lord instructed Jeremiah to return to Hananiah and tell him that although he broke a wooden yoke, an iron yoke would take its place. Iron could not be broken like wood; Judah would not escape Babylon's yoke. God was going to put an iron yoke on the neck of the nations, forcing them to serve Nebuchadnezzar.

After reaffirming the Lord's inescapable judgment on Judah, Jeremiah turned to Hananiah and pronounced judgment on him. Because Hananiah had persuaded the nation to "trust in lies," he would die that same year. Death was the Deuteronomic penalty for false prophets. Hananiah had preached rebellion against the Lord by announcing that the period of punishment would end quickly.

The message of our reading seems to be centered in the idea of *truth and trust*. Who is proclaiming the true word of God? Who is trusting and listening to God and who is only trusting themselves? Both prophets claim that they are, but in the end it was Jeremiah who proved to be the *true* prophet of God, someone who trusted God to speak to Him the final truth.

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is:

¹⁵ *Then the prophet Jeremiah said to Hananiah the prophet, "Listen, Hananiah! The LORD has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies.*

In our day and age a lot of people do not trust the church of Christ anymore. People often say Christians say one thing but live another. Ministers, elders, deacons, youth workers are often in the line of fire because the church has lost its prophetic voice.

The church's prophetic voice got silenced just like what happened with Jeremiah. Another man accused him for not prophesying the truth and misleading the people. But this man listened to his own desires and his own ideas and did not consult with the Lord God. Jeremiah on the other hand talked with the Lord and listened to the voice of God.

You and I represent the church. We are facing so many challenges often forgetting whom we serve and to whom we belong. We often get caught up in the business of church life that it becomes almost true of all of us that we serve the church and not the Lord of the church. Ministers, Office bearers, elders, session clerks and treasurers can often make the mistake of talking of the church of Christ as "my church", "my finances", "my books" "our manse" our organization. The good news is that nothing of this church belongs to us. We are not more important than the role we are fulfilling. Each one of us has received talents and gifts which we must use to serve our Lord and Saviour. If we do not use them the Lord will take them away and our prophetic voice will be quiet.

As a congregation you and I cannot stop proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to all people. But we must be sensitive in our witness. We cannae moan about not having enough people to help in the one instance and in another proclaiming that we trust the Lord. We cannae gossip among each other and tell children and others in

our villages that God is a God of love. We cannae speak of hope to people who are in desperate need of comfort and pastoral care while we speak and act like people who have no hope at all! We cannae claim to know the will of God unless we pray.

This is the time for us as a congregation to proclaim anew:

- the prophetic message to everyone in the community,
- the prophetic voice that cannot be silenced or subdued,
- the prophetic message that we have a God in whom we can trust,
- the prophetic message that everyone that believes in the salvation of Jesus Christ will not die but live in all eternity with the Triune God, Father Son and Holy Spirit.

Anyone that says something different is a false prophet and not talking on behalf of God.

Amen