

This extract from Jeremiah is a bit dismal!

But then the state of the people of Judah was pretty dismal.

They had seen Israel in the north be captured by the Assyrians and all the Israelites carried off to exile.

They had been warned by their prophets and paid no heed.

Now the prophets in the south - in Judah are speaking the same warnings.

The people are no longer being faithful to God they have gone back to the old ways in the time of the Judges.

Compared with them in Judah (3.11) the Israelites were not too bad and God forsook them - so Judah! Watch out!

But Jeremiah is not just a prophet of doom, he is also a prophet of restoration.

he sees a day when God's people will repent of their wicked ways and will return to the Lord

then, says Jeremiah, 4. 2
God's promise to bless Abraham and through him, all nations that promise will be kept.

Return to me
Live godly lives

Third Sunday
of Epiphany

Jeremiah 3. 21 → 4. 2
Titus 2. 1 - 8, 11 - 14

Here is a people that still pay lip-service to the Lord

but their actions betray their true loyalty.
They trust in the Ba'als and other pagan gods
and they trust in their own achievements
to bring in the harvest and defend their land.

But verses 22 to 25 hint at Judah's repentance.
They remember times past
and how in the end
they had to return to the Lord - or perish.

They were judged, not on their words
but on the proof in their lives
of their loyalty to the Lord.

Their repentance had to show in changed lives -
in sincere repentance.

As it happens - history tells us - they didn't do it.

The language of repentance on their lips
but not the acts of repentance in their lives.

Eventually , not long after this
Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians
and the southern tribes also
were carried off into exile.
And Jeremiah saw it happen.

Now this is what Paul's letter to Titus
is saying also.

2. 1 - 8 contains advice to various groups
the older men, the older women
the younger women, the younger men
and it is advice about their lifestyle.

This was written to the church in Crete
where Titus was the leader of the church
left there by Paul to complete his teaching
and to appoint elders for each congregation.

And it seems Crete
was a particularly godless place!
And some of the local godlessness
had crept into the church.

So chapter 1 advises Titus
to be careful whom he chooses for leadership
and to be firm with rebellious groups
in the congregation

So the last verse of chapter 1
*They claim to know God
but by their actions they deny him.*

Just the same as in Jeremiah.

Deeds may not make you a Christian
but they should be the fruit of a Christian life.

He adds a bit about slaves and masters too
in verses 9 - 10

but it gets left out now in this "politically correct" age!

We could go into the details
about temperance, self-control, faith and love.

About wives being subject to their husbands
and busy at home!

But it is probably part of cultural relativity
and so I won't mention it - much.

But the next section - 11-14
is not culturally relative
it is absolute teaching.

Paul reminds Titus of why
our behaviour ought to be "godly"

*For the grace of God that brings salvation
has appeared to all men.*

Once you become a Christian
you are no longer part of your culture
You are part of a new culture
a godly culture.

This is for all - no excuse -
ungodly behaviour is ungodly in any culture.

Paul says of this grace

*It teaches us to say "No"
to ungodliness and worldly passions
and to live self-controlled, upright
and godly lives
in this present age.*

Heaven isn't just about something beyond the grave
it is about life now - in this present age.

In fact, because this present age is so ungodly
it is even more important
for the church to be seen to be different,
by displaying God's values.

You didn't have to write this stuff
to Jewish Christians
because even if they were failures
(like Israel and Judah in Jeremiah's time)
they still knew what God's values were
because it was their culture.

However, these new churches,
like the one on Crete (Titus)
and the ones in Ephesus (Timothy)

they had no background of godly teaching
and so they had to be taught.
And they had to be careful
because the world in which they lived
and from which they came
would apply pressure.

Remember Ephesians 2.1 -

*You were dead
in your transgressions and sins.*

Crete was the same (Titus 1.12)

*Cretans are always liars,
evil brutes, lazy gluttons.*

So this life is in need of a new standard of godliness

and even better - remember - verse 13

*we wait for the blessed hope
the glorious appearing
of our great God and Saviour,
Jesus Christ.*

Why is this Advent hope relevant -
because he died for a purpose
to save us from judgement
and he is returning as judge
and that real soon!

Why did he die? verse 14

*He gave himself for us
to redeem us from all wickedness
and to purify for himself
a people that are his very own
eager to do good.*

This is why Jesus died.

*to redeem us from all wickedness
and to purify for himself
a people that are his very own
eager to do good.*

And these Christians in Crete
are throwing it all away.

Jewish Christians didn't need to be told
but Gentile ones did.

If we look to today
we see a society, which until fairly recently
was based on godly principles.

It would not have been so necessary to teach
in a past generation
that we ought to live godly lives.

People knew what was right and wrong.

However, today,
our so-called "Christian" society
is no longer based on godly principles
but on the false gods of "success" and "profit"
and "pleasure" and "self-fulfilment".

Also, as the world shrinks,
because of better communications
and vastly improved mobility
we see in our own homes
and possibly live next door to
cultures that are not based
on biblical principles at all.

This is something *George Carey* tried to do
some years ago in interfaith dialogue
(sadly to the exclusion of proclaiming Jesus)
calling other faith leaders
to join together in proclaiming
common values and ideals
the sort of things found here in Titus
goodness, integrity, love
to be peaceable and considerate,
to show true humility.

We may not feel able to stand alongside
these followers after other gods

but we ought to be leaders in this task
of demonstrating a godly way of life.

If this "Grace of God" stuff is true
we ought to outshine the others
in our godliness.

We ought not to need their help
in living a life that is pure
and free from all wickedness.

This is not just about our life together in the church
it is about our relationships and attitudes
in our business, with our neighbours,
at our leisure, and on our families
(not all of whom are Christians!)

Maybe God wants to challenge us gently
about the witness of our lifestyle.

If he does - give it some thought - and prayer -
and let his grace transform you
so you will shine more brightly
in this dark world.

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