

We will be stopping in the middle of the sermon to share communion, and then I will carry on with the sermon.

One of the most embarrassing things I have had to deal with on a youth weekend was a stalker! We had taken a youth group to a Northern Ireland match on the Saturday afternoon. The stalker came from a few rows below us, and attempted unsuccessfully to negotiate the spiked fence separating the stand from the pitch. Initially he was unsuccessful, and gave up, but a few moments later he managed to make it, and got out onto the pitch and caused a real commotion.

I can't remember the score of the match, or the date of the match, or even specifically who I was sitting beside at the time, but I can remember the impact on the youth group – it was the most memorable thing from the whole weekend. – in fact I can't even remember what I was speaking about that weekend, but anyone who saw the stalker remembers him. Actually they don't remember him, but they

remember what he did – because it was shocking!

The prophets shocked, and one of them even walked around naked and barefoot for three years.

You wouldn't want a prophet sitting beside you in church. You would be very uncomfortable. Prophets were unpredictable. They were counter culture, and some of them looked weird.

For example – it was Isaiah – who stripped and walked naked and barefoot for three years (20:3). He was warning the nations of Egypt and Ethiopia that, God's judgments was coming and this judgment would bring shame – and desolation. God told Isaiah to walk around naked for three years telling everyone that when Assyria comes and defeats the Egyptians and Ethiopians, their soldiers would be stripped naked and marched into captivity.

I don't imagine Isaiah got many invitations to dinner.

Prophets were unpredictable and uncomfortable to be around.

Jeremiah walked around with a yoke on his shoulders to warn the people that they were going to be yoked to an enemy state. This offended another prophet so much that he took the yoke off Jeremiah's shoulders and broke it into pieces to indicate that Jeremiah's prophecy wouldn't come true. So Jeremiah went to the blacksmith and had iron yokes made which couldn't be broken. The message was clear – God's will will be done., The people will be carried off into captivity, and there is nothing anyone will be able to do to stop it!

You see God had warned the people for hundreds of years that if they continued to worship idols, and engage in infant sacrifice and that unless they returned to him, and lived for him, he would punish them by exiling them to other nations.

Remember what the purpose of Israel was:

1. **A WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY:** This nation would consist of people who would really know God, and worship him with their lips and from their hearts.
2. **A JUST COMMUNITY:** This nation would consist of people who would treat one another so well, that everyone would be valued, even the poor would be well cared for.
3. **A LIGHT FOR ALL OTHER NATIONS:** This nation would be such a model nation, that it would shine like a light to all other nations of what a nation should be.

But these people were no longer genuinely worshipping God in their hearts. Instead of valuing and supporting each other they were selfish, and were working for the worldly dream of affluence, and neglecting the poor and vulnerable. They were no longer any use to God in terms of being a light to other nations.

And so God sent prophets to warn them and call them to repentance. But the nation of Israel refused to believe them.

First of all the prophet Ahijah took a brand new cloak, ripped it into twelve pieces.

Over 200 years later, after warnings and messages, the Northern Tribes were punished by God and carried into captivity in Assyria

That left two tribes in the Southern Kingdom, known as Judah.

For another 130 years God continued to send prophets to them to warn them that the same fate would befall them. But they refused to listen.

One of these prophets was Ezekiel. He had some terrible oracles to enact:

Possibly the most notable was the prediction of the siege of Jerusalem:

God told him to lie out in the street on his left side for 390 days, then to lie on his right side

for 40 days. All this time he had a meager ration of food which he was told he could only cook over a fire of human dung.

Here is what his acted oracle meant:

He lay on his left side for 390 days to indicate the length of Israel's exile, then he had to turn to the other side for 40 days to indicate the length in years of Judah's punishment.

Whilst doing this he was told to eat specific food, which was rationed to indicate how harsh the siege would be on Jerusalem's inhabitants. He was also told to cook his food on a fire of human dung, indicating how defiled the nation had become in God's sight.

But astonishingly – the Jews refused to believe Ezekiel, and continued in their ungodliness. Then eventually they were led into captivity, and all of Israel is left like a Ghost town. Utterly desolate, and of no use to anyone. The Land that flowed with Milk and Honey became a barren land filled with dead bones.

This was utter shame and desolation. The prophets ranted and raged and tried to grab the attention of the Kings and then the people, with a few exceptions they refused to listen.

Is this not heart breaking, that people would be so stubborn and refuse to listen to God's clear commands?

Lets just stop for a moment to allow the prophets to speak to us. Have you lost the love you once had for the Lord? Are you more concerned these days with what you want to achieve in this world, than you are for the people this world abuses? Are you no longer any use to God in terms of showing the world what he is like?

Let the prophets speak to you, and chose to obey their message.

The prophets were not just sent to warn the people about Gods Judgement, they were also sent to bring them comfort

When they were carried into captivity, they got the message. That is why Shadrach Meshach and Abednego refused to worship the false image of Nebuchadnezzar, and faced him down, and were thrown into the fiery furnace. This was a new generation of Jews who had learned the lessons from the past, and were prepared to go to their deaths in order to remain faithful to God.

Some of the prophets were specifically sent to bring comfort to the captives, Daniels Dreams spoke of God's sovereignty in the events of the worlds superpowers.

Zechariah comforted the faithful with the image of God loving them so much that they moved him to sing songs about them,

Amos reminded them that God is the defender of the downtrodden.

All of them pointed to Jesus.

But people are stubborn and not willing to listen!

When God called Isaiah to be his prophet, he made it clear to Isaiah how impossible his task was.

God told Isaiah they would not listen, and it seemed as if there was nothing they could do to change God's plans.

Would it have been possible for the people to get the message, and repent? Was that possible, would that have averted God's judgment? Well, long before God was sending prophets to warn the nation of Israel about their sins and his judgment, he sent Jonah to Nineveh. Nineveh was a pagan city, not part of the nation of Israel. When Jonah preached God's judgement the city repented.

When they listened to the prophet and repented, God said:

'should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left.'

God is a Just and Righteous Holy God, he is also a gracious and compassionate God, full of mercy and forgiveness, and he offers that forgiveness to everyone – even the most sinful of us.

– but here is the most amazing thing about God – even though he knows we won't listen – he goes further and further and further to get through to us.

It is not God's will that anyone should perish, and so

³² And everyone who calls
on the name of the LORD will be saved;
for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
there will be deliverance, Joel 2:32

this prophecy was fulfilled in Christ Jesus who was crucified for our sins.

Will you not listen? How far does God have to go? Could we ever have imagined that he would go that far for us?

ChristChurch- this is what the prophets were all about - God getting his message through to

people who are not interested. How loving and gracious is that? That he would go far beyond our wildest expectations to get our attention and give us himself?

The story is told, I believe it is true, of a housewife who is standing at her kitchen sink, washing dishes, and her mind starts to think about how many times she has done this same thing. Standing in this kitchen, washing these dishes, then drying and putting them away. So she stopped what she was doing, took off her apron, and left home.

She would phone every so often to check up on the children, but she would never tell them where she was. Every time her husband pleaded with her to come home she explained that she just couldn't.

The husband eventually tracked her down through a detective agency, and so he went to the address she was staying at and knocked on the door. When she opened the door she didn't say a word. She simply packed her backs

and got into the car with him and in silence he drove her home.

Several hours later when they were in their bedroom he finally spoke and asked

'Why didn't you come home before? Over the phone I begged you to come home to us. Why didn't you come?'

She answered 'I heard your words, but it wasn't until you came for me that I realised how much you cared and how important I was to you.'

The words of the prophets tell us that God loves us, but he goes even further – he himself comes to get us and bring us back home.

The consequences are unspeakable for those who refuse to hear, what else could God do? He sent his only son – the precious lamb of Heaven, to this awful world where we plucked his beard and pressed thorns into his forehead, and we hammered nails into his hands and feet, and we raised him high on a

cross and then we mocked him by saying – if he is God let him save himself – that is why the consequences for rejecting Jesus Christ are the most terrible of consequences.

Will you not listen?

Jesus wept over Jerusalem –

‘ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing’

The message of the prophets to some of us here is to give up our sins and look to Jesus for salvation.

(John 3:14 - Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up)

Can I invite the Choir to come and lead us, and for those serving Communion serve us after I have prayed.

COMMUNION

The prophets had a second message, it was for those who responded to the word and who remained faithful to God. It was a message of Comfort. The people were told that although they would suffer, this was God's working out of his holy ways, and they could trust him in that.

The prophets bring a similar message of comfort to those of us here today and who are faithful to the Word of God, but who are frightened by what they see happening around them, and this is their message: God is sovereign, and God is in control, and in that we can take comfort, even if we are being persecuted for the name of Christ.

Do you remember that profound lesson we learned in 1 Peter – regarding suffering, Peter's prayer was not that we would be alleviated from our suffering, Peter's prayer was that we would continue to good in the midst of our suffering. The point is that the Christian's purpose of bringing Hope to this world through Good Works is so crucial, that Peter

prayed that even our suffering might not prevent us from doing good.

Because the purpose in our salvation is not to make us so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly use at all.

Leah has spoken to us about CAP money management.

Please don't come to it because you want a bigger house. But what about coming so that you can figure out how to reorganize the resources God has given you so that you can provide help- and support to others?

And so just as the Old Testaments Prophets made us uncomfortable, so Jesus makes us uncomfortable.

He makes us uncomfortable when he says:

- 'sell all you have and give to the poor'
- Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

- “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also

This is hard, and it takes commitment, and it will bring opposition.

The prophets were uncomfortable to be around – and the truth is so is Jesus – until you submit to him, and fall into line with him – then his burden becomes light and his yoke becomes easy.

Only a few answer the call – will you do it?

Lets pray.