



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The First Sunday After Trinity, June 18th, 2017

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

The Prophet Jeremiah, the subject of the first lesson at Morning Prayer today, lived in an age much like our own. The government of the Kingdom of Judah, like that of the U.S.A., had been founded on the commitment that it would be ruled according to God's laws. By the time Jeremiah arrived on the scene, however, this solemn commitment had been quite forgotten.

Instead of ruling according to God's Commandments, the government's operating philosophy was: "If it feels good, do it." The first four Commandments – that govern our relationship with God – were no longer honored even in the most holy place on earth: the Temple built by King Solomon. If you had visited the Temple in Jeremiah's day you would have been hard pressed to figure out just who it was folks were worshipping there.

Images of pagan gods had been installed in the Temple precincts, including statues of the horses of the Assyrian's sun god. The rest of the commandments were similarly flouted. In the Kidron Valley, just outside the city walls, parents sacrificed their unwanted newborns to the appalling Phoenician fire god Moloch.

For 40 years, Jeremiah, with increasing desperation, denounced the people's apostasy. Time and again he reminded them of the Fifth Commandment which warned the Children of Israel that if they abandoned the covenant their ancestors had made with God, they would lose possession of the land he had given them.

But the people rejected the warnings of the man we now regard as one of Israel's most important prophet. Indeed. The fruit of a prophetic career that spanned 40 years was one single convert: Baruch, his secretary.

Jeremiah's problem was not that he lacked eloquence. Nor did he lack a flair for public relations. He dreamed up the wildest publicity stunts to get his name in the papers. The reason for his lack of success was that he was on the losing side of a battle of ideas – a battle that has been going on from the very beginning of time.

It is an intellectual war between two schools of thought. One is committed to molding the human mind to construct a perfectly just and equal society. The other is inspired by the vision of a society that echoes God's principles – principles enunciated in Holy Scripture.

It is, in fact, the same battle taking place today in our schools, universities, cultural institutions, legislatures, in the media and – as in Jeremiah's day – in our churches. And, just as in Jeremiah's day, the visionaries who are trying to remake society according to human concepts of perfection seem to have the upper hand.

Jeremiah's experience gives us cause both for serious concern and for hope. The consequence of the false prophets' temporary victory in the battle of ideas was the total destruction of Jerusalem. A few years after Jeremiah's denunciation, Judah's politicians – urged on by false prophets – backed the wrong horse in Egypt's struggle with the newly-emerged Babylonian Empire.

But, ultimately, Jeremiah was the victor in the war of ideas. The false prophets might have won the allegiance of politicians who caused Judah's destruction, but it was Jeremiah who won the hearts and minds of the people who rebuilt Jerusalem 70 years later and whose vision of godly society still shapes Jewish life today.

The Book of Daniel contains a graphic account of how a group of Jewish students put into practice the ideas that Jeremiah enunciated. It tells how Nebuchadnezzar, a visionary dedicated to building a manmade heaven on earth, tried to convert them to his vision of society and the strategy the young men employed to stay on focus.

The Babylonians thought themselves far more advanced than the people of Judah. The Jews were obstacles to social progress. They clung to a primitive to a primitive religion, claiming there is only one god and they were his chosen people. Their god held them to a ludicrously rigid moral code, which made it hard for them to live in harmony with Babylon's broad-minded, tolerant citizens.

Nebuchadnezzar tackled the problem by trying to win the hearts and minds of Judah's best and brightest. He awarded Judah's most promising youths scholarships to the University of Babylon for an intensive, all expenses paid, course in Babylonian liberal arts and sciences.

The students were also given the singular honor of supplies of food and wine from Nebuchadnezzar's own kitchen. And those who graduated with honors were guaranteed top jobs in Babylon's civil service.

It was an offer that couldn't be refused. Daniel and his companions – Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah – took full advantage of it. They became star students. Even so, they weren't blind to fact that the purpose of the exercise was to eradicate their Jewish faith by overwhelming it with Babylonian culture.

The first step in the campaign to erase their Jewish loyalties was to give them Babylonian names. No doubt the excuse was that Jewish names were hard to pronounce. But the real goal was to make them think of themselves as Babylonian. Daniel was given the Babylonian name "Beltshazzar." Hananiah was renamed "Shadrach": Mishael, "Meshach"; and Azariah, "Abednego."

Daniel accepted all this – free education, free housing, his job as top civil servant, even his new name – without demur and he threw himself enthusiastically into his new career. "But" we are told, "Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank." Instead, he and his friends asked to be fed only vegetables.

Many commentators attribute Daniel's refusal to accept Nebuchadnezzar's food and drink to Jewish

dietary laws. But this can't be so. There's no reason he would have been denied kosher food. The king had been perfectly accommodating in all other respects. What's more, there's no Jewish proscription against wine. It's also telling that Daniel and his friends didn't make a demonstration of rejecting the king's food. They didn't organize sit-ins at Babylon University. They simply asked their Babylonian mentors to give them vegetables.

What they were actually doing was defining the point beyond which they would not compromise with the Babylonians. Drawing the line at the king's food and wine was an entirely arbitrary thing to do and it was a bit of trial for young fellows with healthy appetites. But it set them apart in a significant way from their fellow Babylonian courtiers and served as a constant reminder of their beliefs.

Their efforts to maintain their faith did stop with this external gesture. Daniel and his friends strengthened themselves spiritually by regular prayer and worship. In doing so, they kept the principles upon which their nation was founded constantly fresh in their minds – enabling them more easily to resist the temptation to compromise . . . to go along to get along.

Today scholarship students no longer eat in king's dining rooms. They forage with the rest in university cafeterias. But the competing philosophies are precisely the same. Nebuchadnezzar's heirs (the folks who exult humanity) currently have the upper hand. And they can reasonably lay claim to many of the 20th Century's most towering achievements. But, as in the 6th Century B.C., they also authored its most appalling disasters – not least the horrors of Nazism and Communism.

People who follow the other school of thought (the one that animated America's founding fathers) are in the same situation as Daniel. To survive, they, too, need to draw a line that sets them apart from folks in the other camp – a line that reminds them who they are and what they stand for. As Daniel discovered, you can worship man-made god or God made man. But you can't do both. *AMEN*

To the only wise God, our Saviour, be honour and glory, dominion and power, both now and forever.
AMEN