

Lord, this morning we pray for all people, everywhere, both close to us and far away.
 Lord please make Your ways known on earth, Your saving power among all people.

We pray for the Church, both here in Toowong and throughout the world, that we, its members, may grow in faith and closeness to You. May we respect the beliefs of others even if we do not share them, celebrate what we have in common and accept our differences. Guide us all in our ministries as we live each day.

God, today we pray for and thank You for doubters
 For those who doubt Your existence,
 For those who doubt the possibility of the new world that Christ is bringing into being,
 and for those who doubt their own worth.

For all who have questions about life, about You, about themselves, we pray.
 We pray that our doubts will lead us to seek new ways, new truths,
 We pray that doubt will lead to deeper questions,
 And lead not to our certainty, but to Your wisdom.

Merciful God, today we pray for all who feel that today holds no promise, no delight, no surprise.
 We pray for all for whom the illness of depression is constant and unrelenting.
 We pause to think of and name in silence those we know who suffer in this way or those who suffer from physical illnesses which leave them feeling weak and in pain, or those whose lives are full of loneliness or empty of love.

God, we pray for all those we have named, for all those among us who suffer silently in private despair and for all who carry a great weight that they have not yet even been able to face.

We pray that the new life You bring, the renewal and a fresh start that You offer, will shine bright and warm into the dark, cold reaches of every suffering person, so that all might experience Your healing and hope, Your resurrection and new life – Your saving grace.

We pray in the precious name of our Lord, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
 Amen.

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Most generous God,
 You have given us so much.
 We now, and from money and other gifts given during the week, bring these to You in thanks and hope, that these gifts will be used to further Your kingdom.

In dedicating them, we take this time to ask for Your help in dedicating ourselves to You to be Your people in the world. through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

It's only 2 weeks until Easter and I'm back in the old testament. A bit strange, especially given that Simon has been focussing on Acts.

Well there is plenty of action in the times of Jeremiah's writing but perhaps not focussed on the same acts that Jesus' disciples were performing, having been blessed with the Holy Spirit.

I'm here this morning in part because, at a recent Morning Tea under the Umbrellas, Beryl (Mortimer) asked a number of us to talk about a scripture verse that is of inspiration to us. I chose an extract from this morning's reading. With Simon not being available today I was willing to talk a bit more about it.

Jeremiah 29:11 in particular is a very well known and loved Bible passage. The Lord says to His people, **"I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you & not to harm you, plans to give you a hope & a future."** This verse is often quoted. It can be seen on cards and posters. And often it's shared with those who are sick or discouraged. It's a wonderful promise; especially for those going through times of trial or facing change or uncertainty.

To understand this verse more fully, however, we need to know something about its background. God's people had for many generations been doing their own thing, going their own way, wilfully disobeying God's laws. Their religion was little more than going through the motions, the ceremonies & traditions. If they were worshipping, their hearts were not in their worship. Many of them had even worshipped pagan gods & got involved in idolatry, something that was strictly forbidden. God's people had rejected the prophets sent to warn them. They were more ready to listen to false prophets who told them things they wanted to hear. The true prophets however, like Jeremiah, warned them of God's coming judgment. Jeremiah warned them that the holy city of Jerusalem & even the Temple would be destroyed by the Babylonians unless they repented.

And of course that is exactly what happened. Nebuchadnezzar first invaded Judah in 605 BC & then again just over seven years later in 597 BC. He took many gifted & important people off into exile, including a young Daniel & his three friends. The Babylonians set up a puppet king, Zedekiah. Far worse was to come in 586 BC in the third & final Babylonian invasion when Jerusalem was destroyed & the magnificent Temple burnt with fire. No longer did the Jewish people have a king or a country. It was a time of national disaster, a day of awful judgment. God's warnings through His prophet had come true.

It was, however, after the first two invasions that Jeremiah wrote to the Jewish exiles in Babylon. They had been uprooted from their own land & were living far away in pagan Babylon – surrounded by a foreign language, religion & culture. Their national pride had been crushed. Their hopes & dreams had been smashed. They must have been asking *"How could God have allowed this to happen? If we are truly God's chosen people, how did we end up here?"*

Sometimes we ask the same questions. When things don't go our way we start questioning God. We say, *"Lord, how could this happen to me? Don't I go to church? Don't I try to be a good Christian? Don't I give offerings? Don't I try to serve you?"*

Yes, we start asking why. We feel discouraged. We feel that God no longer loves us or cares about us. We feel like everything should be going smoothly but it isn't. We shouldn't be having problems, but we are. So what's wrong?

Well in the case of God's people what had happened was part of God's plan, but His plan did not end with judgment or punishment. He had much more in mind, which we will see shortly. Perhaps some of the people knew that their exile in Babylon came following their sin & rebellion. They realised that

their disobedience had caused this disaster. Before the Babylonian invasions & exile many of them had heard the preaching of Jeremiah. At the time very few took him seriously. They preferred to listen to the false prophets who promised that everything would be just fine.

Even after the exile some false prophets were still claiming everything would be fine. In Jeremiah 28 we read about a guy called Hananiah, who claimed God had shown him, that after just two years, all the exiles would return from Babylon. He said, **“This is what the Lord says, ‘...I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon off the neck of all the nations within two years.’”** (Jeremiah 28:11) Of course the Lord never said anything like this. Hananiah wasn’t prophesying God’s word. He was a false prophet telling people what they wanted to hear.

It is the same today. There are many ways we hear about a future that’s what we want to aspire to or want to have happen. We have futurologists, economists, politicians, economists, writers providing their perspectives. Some people look to horoscopes or numerology for their future. Even some Christian preachers have been known to say that if you do certain things such as giving a generous offering or giving a lot of your time to serve, then God will automatically bless you, giving you what you want.

Certainly God does honour our faith. He does answer prayers. He does heal miraculously. But we must remember **He does not always do things our way.** Prosperity in a worldly sense is not the same as spiritual prosperity & blessing. In fact **people who suffer for their faith are often closer to God** than those who have everything easy. We must not measure success & prosperity by looking only at material blessings.

So as we think about the wonderful promise God made to His people in exile in Babylon it’s helpful to remember the background. God’s people had sinned. In fact if you look back through the Old Testament prior to this, there were just so many times that God’s people turned away from Him. Not that this doesn’t happen now.

Yet incredibly God had not rejected them. He still had plans for them, plans to bless them - to give them a hope & a future..... Of course when we hit rock bottom, what else do we do but look up...And *this is a message for those who have hit rock bottom, for those who are ready to admit their need for God’s mercy.* This is a message of hope & encouragement – for those who see their need & who really want to turn back to God.

The promise begins with the words, *“For I know the plans I have for you,”* declares the Lord. (v.11) Isn’t this amazing! God had plans for His rebellious people. He was thinking about them. And God thinks about us too! The God of the universe thinks about us! He knows all about us. He has us in His mind. He knows who we are & where we are. He knows our needs, our fears, our hopes, our dreams. His eye is upon us & His love surrounds us. No human being can even begin to love us or watch over us like God does.

How easily we forget about others, even those we love. We forget the needs of our closest friends. Life gets so busy we forget birthdays, anniversaries & other special days. Someone said, *“The most effective way to remember a partner’s birthday is to forget it once!”*

Even loved ones, may forget us, but God never does. Though He has the whole universe to rule, His eye is on our world. And even though He has the whole of planet to care for, He hears us all..... I’m part of Gideons in Australia and our National President would say **that is awesome!**.....

The Hebrew word translated as “plans” comes three times in this one verse. This word also means “thoughts” or “thinking”. God is not just saying, “I’ve got plans for you.” He is also saying, “I have been thinking about you.” It is **so** personal.

If your boss says, “I’ve got plans for you,” you might immediately start worrying. But if the boss says, “I’ve been thinking about you,” you’re more likely to think they’re being kind-hearted and there’s something positive in the future.

Jeremiah had a message from God for the Jewish exiles. The message was written down & hand-carried from Judah to Babylon. Jeremiah told the exiles God had plans for them. God had them on His heart & mind. If you think about their situation, for those who believed it, that must have been a huge comfort. Instead of feeling abandoned & lost, they would know God was alive. He had His eye upon them despite the fact they were so far from home in a foreign land... And God had instructions for them.

First of all He wanted them to settle down & make their homes in Babylon. We read in v.5 God told them: **“Build houses & settle down; plant gardens & eat what they produce.”** God also told them to marry & have families.” Young exiles like Daniel did just what God, through Jeremiah the prophet, told them. Though they were foreigners they were to play very important roles in Babylonian society & even government. Most of the Jewish exiles took Jeremiah's advice & God did indeed bless them in exile.

So even their captivity was for their good..... So what does that mean for us? - The 1st message I take from this, I’m coining as:

1. **Stop and smell the roses**

Recently I read a poem I found on Facebook it was written by a young person who had cancer I think. Her message is simple and one I should have adopted a long time ago. It can be found in the following extract from her poem:

Do you run through each day
On the fly?
When you ask How are you?
Do you *hear* the reply?
When the day is done
Do you lie in your bed
With the next hundred chores
Running through your head?

I wonder whose plan I was trying to follow when I got myself so busy that the words of this poem described me so well. How often are we thinking if only we could just get to the stage, or next year or just beyond now. Sometimes the here and now doesn’t seem so good, but maybe we’re looking at it with our eyes and not thinking about it from God’s.

I **do** think it’s fine to be busy, at least sometimes, but I’ve learned more recently that there’s so much more joy, fulfilment and understanding of real prosperity when you take time to appreciate what God is providing. Look forward sure – but realise God is saying, seek the peace and prosperity in the place you find yourself now, even if it’s not part of your plan or your ideal. Maybe we’re listening to a future painted by others, or even ourselves, and neither are listening to or following God. If God hasn’t sent them or the message we hear, it won’t be for our benefit, despite any appeal it might seem to have.

And also be aware that even though we may not like where we are at that moment, sometimes God doesn't change our situation, because he wants to change our heart.

And of course, if we are following the busy path, confident we have the answers, we may not be leaving enough time and space to communicate with God – so we may not feel, hear, see or know what He's saying.

How do we know what God is saying to us?

2. That's the 2nd point for me - we will have a chance to know what God is saying to us, if we take the time to pray.

In verse 7 of the reading, the Jews were encouraged to pray “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if *it* prospers, you too will prosper”

I think we all deep down know, and many have experienced, that God is a God who hears prayer; he listens to the requests of His people, and answers them - in His own time and way; Isn't that a great encouragement to pray to Him.

If we take time to pray and pray in the right way, God will grant His presence, He will indulge us in communion with Him and He will provide fresh supplies of His grace, He will give us mercy and satisfy our needs including our spiritual needs.

But we need to listen to Him and not those He didn't send - that also means letting His plans take priority, not our own plans & ideas...

In the case of the Jewish exiles however God had longer-term plans. Jeremiah continued with the word God had given him. He wrote in v.10: “**This is what the LORD says: 'When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you & fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place.'**” Exactly 70 years after they had gone into exile God miraculously allowed a return to the land to rebuild the Temple & then later to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem. That wonderful story we can read in Old Testament books of Ezra & Nehemiah.

The promise of return may have seemed far off to those early exiles because in 70 years most of them would be too old to return. Many in fact would have died by then. Yet the promise was to them & their children & grandchildren. God wants to bless us. He wants to bless our children & our grandchildren. We may not see all His good promises fulfilled in our lifetime or in the way we would like but He will fulfil them in His time & in His way. And His time & His ways are perfect.

And so we come again to the promise with which we began. In v.11 the Lord says, “**For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you & not to harm you, plans to give you hope & a future.'**” God's people may have felt that God was punishing them because of their sin, and they may have also felt He no longer loved them. They may have felt He had rejected them. But no, God wanted them to know He loved them, despite their sin. He wanted to restore them. He wanted to bless them with spiritual & material blessings. They may have felt they had no hope, they had no future but God wanted them to know in fact they had both a hope & a future - & so did their kids.

We read on in vrs.12 & 13, **“Then you will call on me & come & pray to me, & I will listen to you. You will seek me & find me when you seek me with all your heart.”** God had plans for His people but He also wanted them to call out to Him in prayer. He wanted them to seek Him & to do so sincerely with all their hearts. His promise was that if they did pray he would listen. His promise was that if they did seek Him with all their hearts that they would find Him.

I think the most significant part of the whole reading is this. So my 3rd point is about

3. **Praying with all our heart**

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Who knows the Lord’s prayer? It’s in Luke Chapter 11. Jesus’ disciples ask Him to teach them how to pray. So, beginning at verse 2, Jesus tells them what to say in prayer.

Now for me, I learned the Lord’s prayer when I was young. I learned it in the older language of that time and I re-learned it as more modern translations were adopted. So I was confident to pray the Lord’s prayer. And I also taught my 3 children the Lord’s prayer.

Sometimes when kids learn something like this, they really don’t understand what’s it’s about and so you get misinterpretations. Here’s a few I’ve found:

- From a 3 year old named Reese “Our Father, Who does art in heaven, Harold is His name.
- A 4 year-old prayed, "And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets."
- Another more modern 3 year-old prayed. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us some E-mail"

I think the kids’ interpretations help us to understand the issue here. In their case, they might be praying purposefully but they don’t know what it’s all about. They have a good excuse in that they’re simply too young. But if, as an older person like me, you just recite the words then it’s certainly not praying with all my heart.

If we really want to communicate with our Lord, it needs to be with diligence, sincerity, integrity and even eagerness. And I think if we’re talking about the heart, it needs to be with compassion and in faith and in hope.

It probably means taking some time. Simon taught me how fruitful it is to begin prayer with a period of silence - to enable a connection to be established through the Holy Spirit. I’ve found this really important and useful in helping to get rid of, or at least reduce, the “me” thoughts. I think praying with all my heart means handing myself over to God – trying to let my thoughts and words be His.

So when you pray, be it the Lord’s prayer or something more specific don’t do what I was always prone to doing. Take time and express this very important communication with God, from your heart – That’s what God has told us to do, through Jeremiah, if we want to have real communication with Him.....

The great news is the continuation and emphasis of this promise from Jesus. After telling the disciples how to pray the Lord’s prayer, we read much the same wonderful promise from Luke chapter 11, verses 9 & 10, where Jesus said to His followers: **“Ask & it will be given to you; seek & you will find; knock & the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; & to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”**

As we approach Easter we are reminded that God loved us so much that He sent Jesus to die for us. This too was part of God's great plan for us - an amazing plan - to bless us, and to give us a hope & a future.

Yes, sometimes it is hard to believe, it is hard to hold on in faith when everything seems to be falling apart, when life is tough. But this promise in Jeremiah & the promise of Jesus in Luke, can lead us out of darkness into the light. We can have hope for the future. Of course Christians suffer. We get sick. We face trouble. We go through all kinds of hardship. Ask the Christians in Iraq or Turkey if they know anything about suffering. Ask the Christians in North Korea or Burma if it is easy to follow Jesus. Christians are not spared suffering. There are times when we go through the fires.

A guy named James Hudson Taylor was the founder of the China Inland Mission (CIM, which is now OMF International). As well as bringing God's word to many Chinese, He was a tireless campaigner against the opium drug problem of that time.

He was an old man when the terrible Boxer Rebellion (1900-1901), broke out in China - 58 missionaries & 21 children & more than 2,000 Chinese believers were killed. When Hudson Taylor heard the news it was as if a knife pierced his heart. He said, *"I cannot read. I cannot think. I cannot even pray; but I can trust."*

We do not always understand what's happening to us but when we are in those dark moments we **can** keep trusting in the Lord, the One who has loving plans for us, plans to prosper us, plans to give us a hope & a future – And we will find Him and can communicate with Him if we remember Jeremiah's message from God **"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart"**

So let's pray – First in silence

Lord We ask for Your help to follow Your plans for our lives rather than our own plans, knowing and accepting that Your plans are perfect. Give us peace, faith and hope to accept our situations, and experience through them, the fullness of Your love. Lord, as we try to pray to You, open the eyes of our hearts – so that we listen to **Your** voice and not the wrong ones, accepting that Your ways and times are different from ours. Lord we want to pray to You with all of our heart so that we **do** find You and shine in the light of Your glory. We pray to You in the name of Jesus.

Jeremiah 29:4-14 NIV

4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: **5** “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. **6** Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. **7** Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. **Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.**” **8** Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. **9** They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.

10 This is what the Lord says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. **11** **For I know the plans I have for you,**” declares the Lord, **“plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.** **12** Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. **13** **You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.** **14** I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

Luke 11:1-13 NIV

1 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” **2** He said to them, “When you pray, say: “ ‘Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. **3** Give us each day our daily bread. **4** Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation. ’ ” **5** Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; **6** a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ **7** And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ **8** I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need. **9** “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. **10** For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. **12** “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? **13** If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Let’s finish with the Benediction:

May the love of God which gives life to the world sustain you;
 May the bread of life, Jesus Christ, feed you with the food that endures to eternal life;
 May the power of the Holy Spirit nourish and strengthen you in faith..
 Go now in peace, to love and serve the Lord:
 In the name of Christ. AMEN