

## Ups and Downs

*Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26*

A few days after Valentine's Day, there is a surprising amount of heart talk in our reading from the prophet Jeremiah. There is talk about the heart that turns away from the Lord. There is talk about the heart being deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt and hard to understand. There is talk about the heart being tried. Is it honest; is it faithful; is it true; is it comprised of love? In the ups and downs of life, do we follow our heads, or our hearts, or a mixture of both? Do we think too much without feeling. Do we feel too much without thinking? How do we cope with the ups and downs of life, the blessings and the woes?

Jeremiah stood in the midst of a time of transition. His career as a prophet began in the shadow of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. It ended in a time of exile. Having lost his home with others when the holy city was conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians, he was finally forced to flee to Egypt, likely against his will, by those who had remained to the end in Jerusalem. Jeremiah had seen it all coming and counselled the people to surrender or be destroyed. Exile was to be the new normal. How would the people of God respond? As if they lived in a desert? Or, would they be planted in this strange world like trees rooted next to a flowing river? Only one response would indicate faithfulness and trust.<sup>1</sup>

In times of great change and transition it is not always easy to remain faithful. In his heart talk, Jeremiah talked about those whose hearts would turn away from God. He likens them to a shrub in the desert, constantly searching for water that could never be found. What would be the modern equivalent? The search for wealth, for material goods, for fame amidst the abundance of choices we face in daily living. Not that everyone is living a life of quiet or noisy desperation

outside the church, but how many beyond our doors are searching and searching for something, and not finding it; or working and working and working, and not finding rest? Might that be what we, with our words and our music, our hospitality and welcome, our busy activities and the quieter times of reflection in services like these, have to offer. In the ups and downs of life, in the unexpected upset, in the moments of blank boredom, in the frenetic activity, is this place, let's use the old word, 'sanctuary', is this place one where ups and downs can be put into perspective, and encouragement be given and hope found as people have the opportunity to draw breath?

During lockdown, when we could not meet together, I remember sharing a breathing exercise that is sometimes used with anxious people. Breathe in for 1, and out for 1, breathe in for 2, and breathe out for two; in for 3, and out for 3; in for 3, and out for 4; up to five, and out for 5. Don't do any more than that or we'll need to dial 999 or alert Purves the undertakers. Breathe easily and gently, please! The point is that there is something in the mindful control of breathing that changes the rhythm – of life – and perspective is altered. In the ups and downs of life, in the sanctuary of this place, focussing on breathing, and know that the Hebrew word for Spirit is breath, we bring God in. We turn away not from God but from the parched places and wilderness, the uninhabited land salted by tears, towards something more hopeful, more life-affirming, more God. What a curse it is not to leave room for the Spirit of God, breathing in our lives. What a woe it is to rely only on our own strength and ingenuity, and not find encouragement from those around us, and from God. Are you dry of hope? Dry of blessing? Dry of opportunity and imagination? Dry of love? In the ups and downs of your life, where are you today?

We live in a world of seeming prosperity, yet we also live in a world that does not always feel or look right. I cannot get out of my mind those long lines of exiled children, women and men walking out of their refugee camps in Gaza, and back into the ruins of their towns and city. No

proper house over their heads but yet another tent as they sit in the rubble of what had been their homes. And the threat of inhumane billionaires to exile them again to other refugee-laden lands so that bombed Gaza may rise from ruins to be a playing ground for the gaudy well-heeled and their golden towers. And Ukraine and its ongoing agony whose fate seems to lie in the hands of a tyrant and a populist. These are the parched places and wilderness, the uninhabited lands salted by tears, alongside many others today. The ups and downs.

Jeremiah knew about living with ups and downs. He painted word pictures of impending doom and gloom. Life as a desert and therefore a desperate struggle. None is excluded from the dark places. Our stories, still, are rooted somehow in these ancient stories of Israel. It is into those stories, and ours, that God came, and still comes, to test minds and search hearts and show us another way.

God has not made us to be parched and live in desert lands with dry roots. God wants us to be like trees planted by water, with roots finding the stream, and living without fear when the heat comes, and leaves remaining green, and not being anxious in the time when there is a drought of hope, and not ceasing to bear fruit. God wants us to put down deep roots into His love and care and strength and perseverance. God wants us to endure the ups and downs, with the help of others, with the help of God. To see that we are not alone, and that there are people out there, there is God out there, on our side. In the desert. In the down times of life. To help us *up* again, gradually, until we are able to stand, and walk; and in our turn help others.

The God Who tests our heart is not to be feared, but to be trusted. Are you for God, yet?

Jeremiah paints an image of a tree planted by water. Trees teach us about life with and without God. The tree can be an image for humanity gone awry: it was a tree's fruit that tripped up Adam and Eve in the poetry of Eden. But the tree is also the fulcrum of our salvation, or our rescue from

the curse and the woe. Jesus bore the curse and woe of crucifixion on a tree so we could be grafted on to the tree of God's people, where we can be clean, and safe, and free. This is the hope dangling before you today. This is why God tests your heart: not to make you afraid but to help you trust God. Are you for God yet?

Jesus, in a different time, also talks about blessings and woes. Matthew sets this collection of sayings in a high place: we know it as the Sermon on the Mount. For Luke mountains are for prayer and encounters with God. Luke sets Jesus' collection of sayings on a plain, where the people are gathered to hear Jesus and be healed of their infirmities and afflictions. Addressing those who wanted to follow Jesus, these words about the ups and downs of life are a call to action, not an attempt to spell out a discrete Christian theology. The God of the prophets is speaking through Jesus.

The blessings and woes challenge us to ask what it is that we value, and what it is that we reject, in relation to faithful Christian living. God's values are different from the world's values. Jesus' belief is that the poor and the hungry, the weeping and the persecuted know their dependence on God more than the rich and the replete, the laughing and the receiving of fawning compliments. Is it that Jesus is asking each one of us – what are the things that are getting in the way of your closeness to God?

Jesus speaks on a level place, on a plain. He is also speaking plainly. Jesus is on the level, speaking directly to us. His purpose is to examine our lives, in much the same way as Jeremiah spoke of God testing our hearts. What do we have to climb over, get around, wade through, go under to get beyond and get to God? Are our roots deep in God's living water, so that our ethics and morality, our treatment of others and our priorities in life, are rooted in Him? Or have we turned away?

The God Jesus speaks of is not always the God we proclaim. Our human inclination is to fit God into our own small definitions, cultures and places. But God always breaks down the barriers we construct to keep God out. God always calls us back to God's way. To take God's blessings seriously is to go against the grain of the world, to ride against the tide. Jesus plainly advises us that the only way to survive the ups and downs of life is to choose God. To reorient relationships and reverse social, economic and political injustices so that we gain right standing in the eyes of God. To demonstrate by how we choose to live and treat others that we have chosen God.

At last, again, always.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> *George H Martin, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 1, p338*