

**Balm in Gilead***Jeremiah 8:18 - 9:1; 1 Timothy 2:1-7*

Jeremiah is often labelled, 'the weeping prophet.' He speaks of an unrepentant and incorrigible people and God's wrathful action. The prophet denounced his people's misplaced confidence in a risk-free faith which people presumed would automatically save them. As Jeremiah surveyed his world there seemed no relief in sight for its hurt as he mourned the absence of God. Jeremiah's pain mirrored by God's pain. When people hurt themselves, God hurts too. Here is God Who is heartsick.

Jeremiah is one of the most personally visible of the Old Testament prophets. When he writes we get not only a record of what he wrote, and what he did, but also what he is feeling. We are presented with the rawness of his struggle with faith. He doesn't gloss over hard times because people only want to hear good news. It makes him an uncomfortable read.

It might be that Jeremiah's initial inspiration comes from the land. It had been a long, hot summer and a drought had descended. The end of summer was, under normal conditions, the time when the rains returned. The harvest of grapes, olives and other fruits was completed by late September/early October. Then new rains could be expected to begin, providing sustenance for the newly sown cereal crops which would be harvested in the Israelite Spring. But when Jeremiah wrote the drought seemed to have continued, parching the newly sprouted grain into useless stubble. No rain, no food, and the people would starve. "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved..."

The drought may be literally blighting food production, but it was the spark to Jeremiah's imagination. The people too are dry; they have lost their way to God. They are spiritually parched

because they've set other priorities, and assumed that going through the motions of belief, without any deep roots, was going to sustain them. When you turn your back on God the giver of life, don't be surprised when the hope of life dries up.

God saw it and wanted to weep; weep enough so that His tears would be like a "spring of water...(like)...a fountain", to irrigate the earth and bring back not just crops, but the hope of life and love.

The people were sick, beyond the healing of conventional cures. Not even the renowned herbal remedies of Gilead would be strong enough to heal the people's illness. *"Is there no balm in Gilead...?"* Gilead, the one region in the realm of Israel famous for its balm that closed wounds and kept them from suppurating had nothing left here. The disease infecting the life of the people was more devastatingly chronic and morbid than could be remedied by medicine. They had a disease of the spirit, the psyche, the soul, and the will.<sup>i</sup> Only the return of God would restore the people. Only the resumption of God's life-sustaining waters, God's presence, was going to heal here.

We heard during the offering the playing of an old African American spiritual, 'There is a Balm, in Gilead', which dates back to at least the C19th, and often, though not exclusively, associated with those who were enslaved, and also those caught up later in the slavery of poverty and hunger during the Great Depression.

**There is a balm in Gilead,  
To make the wounded whole;  
There is a balm in Gilead,  
To heal the sin-sick soul.**

Sometimes I feel discouraged,  
And think my work's in vain,  
But then the Holy Spirit  
Revives my soul again.

We look at our world today and see all too clearly its 'sin-sick' soul. The tyrannical aggressor state that is Russia, violating airspace over Estonia, Poland and Romania in its dangerous goal to dominate the area and its ongoing violation of international law in the illegal Ukrainian invasion.

Is there balm in Gilead?

The United States vetoing for the sixth time a draft resolution that would have demanded an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza and the release of all hostages. Denying in that aid-parched land help that would barely begin to address the catastrophic lack of food, water, and medicine.

Is there balm in Gilead?

Choose virtually any region of the world and you will see a drought of hope, energy, compassion, where our sin-sick world's selfishness and greed and indifference blights these times. Where thin-skinned politicians attack freedom of speech when they don't like what people say. Where political parties of every hue promise the earth at election-time and so often appear not to listen to the electorate thereafter.

Is there balm in Gilead?

Where a populace in our country is all in favour of imposing higher taxes to pay for better healthcare, social care and education so long as *their* taxes aren't increased. Or people inside and outside the Church wanting it to provide everything they think a Church ought to provide without increasing their giving or being willing to pay a reasonable rate for using our facilities. Churches apparently run on good wishes and air.

Is there balm in Gilead?

And what about us and the way we choose to live our lives? People today are no less lost than they were at the time of Jeremiah. Self-interest blinds people to the harm done to others. Greed

flourishes because insecurity reigns. Fear drives people into rigid defensive postures. No one recognizes his or her own role in turning away from God because different priorities have prevailed.<sup>ii</sup> Are *we* open-eyed to our own sin-sick souls, often inflicted by our thoughts and words and actions that reveal just how parched we are, and how far we have left our faith in God behind? Saying it in Church but not doing it out in the world in which we live?

Is there balm in Gilead?

There is no easy answer to that question, and no cheap grace to be offered without recognizing that there is a significant price to pay and a cost to be borne for the sinfulness and brokenness of the world in which we live. Our contribution to that brokenness may be great or small but let's not pretend we haven't added something to the despair of these days.

Is that it then? A bleak, dystopian, doom-laden world. Is there balm in Gilead? The prophet Jeremiah didn't seem to think so, and you and I have our doubts. We shouldn't rush to eradicate or explain away the brokenness of these words and their poignant power. Too often we want to hear 'peace, peace when there is no peace', diminishing the suffering and sin that are for so many the reality of life today. There is a need to speak truth to power about the fractured nature of our world. There is also a need to speak truth to suffering, to weakness, to laziness, and to failure to take responsibility.

Having done all that I believe that it does not and will not end there. The old spiritual turns the Bible quote around and sings, 'There *is* a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole...to heal the sin-sick soul.' There *is*.

It comes about when we see and hear, think and speak, and then act into our broken and sinful world and refuse to accept it as it is. Will we make things better?

Last Sunday night Val Brown from Christian Aid talked about that organization's 80 years. Founded in the depths of the aftermath of World War Two where people and countries and the world were broken. Providing food and shelter; challenging the narrative of despair that was the reality for so many. Powered by faith, Christian Aid grapples today with gritty hope on behalf of children, women and men living with the realities of the global climate crisis which is largely caused by human beings. Christian Aid is compelled by that hopeful vision to work for liberation, justice and love. It's challenged unfair rules. It's demanded change from those in power. It's stood in hope with people living in poverty. It's worked to make sure that the parched lands will be watered again by faith, and hope, and love in action; and that there is, still, balm in Gilead.

That balm has another name: Jesus. When it got so bad God sent Jesus as the rescue and ransom for the sin-sick world.

If you've turned away, maybe it's time to turn back. If you've let your faith dry up, maybe it's time to turn the soul-tap back on. If you've almost given up because it is all too much, Jesus is there. For you. To hold, to help, to heal. So that the sin-sick world, with all its wounds, might be made whole. Slow step by slow step, together, hand in hand with Him, and each other.

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

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Dwight M Lundgren, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3, p77*

<sup>ii</sup> Sharon Peebles Burch, *ibid, p78*