

31st May, 2015.

Reading: Jeremiah 29: 1, 10 - 14

Sermon My Plans offer you a Future and a Hope

The theme at Messy Church on Thursday was based on Jeremiah 29: 11. Jeremiah sends those living in exile a message from the Lord. In the New Living Bible, at verse 11, we read these words:

For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.

It wasn't the easiest theme we have ever had as far as crafts were concerned. Nor was it the easiest theme we have had when it came to looking for a story. However, I came across a video clip about Joseph. Poor Joseph. The video covered several chapters of the Genesis story but basically it showed us that through thick and thin, God was with Joseph and had a plan for Joseph, a plan for good, despite all that happened to him.

What we saw, firstly, was Joseph being treated badly by his brothers. Once he gets to Egypt, we see him being rescued by and treated well by Potiphar. He was put in charge of his whole house. Then, suddenly, we see him being treated unfairly. He was thrown into jail as a result of a lie but there he was treated well by the Prison Guard. He was put in charge of the other prisoners.

The story continued with Joseph being released from prison when Pharaoh needed him to interpret his dreams. He was treated well by Pharaoh and in the end rescued his

brothers and many others by providing them with food during the seven years of famine.

His brothers planned to harm him and he landed in pretty dicy situations but God's ultimate plan was for good and good triumphed over evil.

One of the children asked me if God has a plan for us and the answer is yes. Jeremiah's message from God was that the people would have a future and a hope. God's plan has never changed although sometimes that belief can be challenged by events which are so awful that some must wonder if God's plan is failing.

As I watched the news the other night, I saw the camps which had been set up in Malaysia and in which countless hundreds of people had been held in captivity, having been given hope of a new life.

Many of them were kept there for as long as a couple of years, and numerous people were tortured, raped and killed, unless, of course, they were able to pay huge ransoms to get a place on a boat which promised new life and renewed hope.

But we know that that was not to be the case for so many. They set off on overcrowded death boats with criminal gangs who cared nothing for their safety as they took them towards Europe. From the time they left their homeland where life was already impossible, false promises were being made to them all along the way.

We saw the haunted look on the faces of those who had escaped and who were lying low in back streets

because of the vulnerability of their situations. Who knows what their futures hold.

Jeremiah's words, or similar, still ring out today from the mouths of criminal gangs: **The plans I have for you are for good and not for disaster, plans to give you a future and a hope.** How hard must it be to trust those words from God when you have heard them from those whom you discover are criminals? How hard must it be to trust those words when you are being used and abused? How hard must it be to trust those words when life is crumbling around you and yet, it was to people whose lives had crumbled around them that those very words were spoken as an encouragement to give them hope.

Those who were in exile in Babylon were probably not treated in the same despicable way as those on who are trying to escape to Europe but they were still refugees who had been forced to leave their homeland and they were struggling with all that happened to them.

The question is, when disaster strikes us or our families or our friends, do we blame God for all that goes wrong? Do we doubt His promise that His plan for us is for good to give us a future and a hope? Or do we focus on the fact that even when bad things happen, God is still with us as He has promised and that through His Son we do have hope and we do have a future, an eternal one.

The other day at Messy Church, there were a number of situations in the minds of, at least, the adults and for which these words of Jeremiah would be an encouragement.

A granny was undergoing major surgery as we met. Someone else's life was hanging in the balance. Someone else had just died that morning and we were aware of other families with whom we had had contact in recent weeks who were also going through an incredibly difficult time.

Those words of Jeremiah are there to encourage God's people and to assure us that, as was the case with Joseph, even when bad things happen, even when life takes a turn that we do not expect or do not want, God is with us holding us, supporting us, strengthening us, comforting us and assuring us that His plans for us are for for good. His saving grace is still at work.

I suspect that is the kind of message which sustains Christians who are being persecuted in various parts of the world. I suspect that is the kind of message which is sustaining the Christians in Nepal as they live with the aftermath of the earthquakes.

I heard a minister from Nepal who must have been at the General Assembly talking on the radio the other day. He spoke of their commitment to rebuild their lives by pulling together and of the faith which sustains them.

The gospel message is not one which promises us an easy life. The gospel message is not one which says if we have faith, life will be good. The gospel led to the Cross and to incredible suffering but that was ultimately for good and to give us a hope and a future.

In John's gospel we read these words:

For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.

God's plan is for good and to give us a future and a hope, no matter the situation in which we find ourselves. Some of what I have been saying may sound a bit like pie in the sky when you die and maybe it is, but then, our faith is not just about today.

Our faith is about eternity. It is about God's saving plan, about God's saving grace, which is every bit as much about the future as it is about the present. When we have hope, hope is about the future and so when we read that God's plan for us is for good and to give us hope and a future, these are words of encouragement.

These are words to hang on to whatever the present predicament we face. These are words of hope and strength to the bereaved and to the dying. These are words which give us the courage to keep going despite the odds.