

Jeremiah 29:4-11

**Sermon 11<sup>th</sup> of November 2018 in St. Bride's Fleetstreet  
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Good morning, everybody.

I am very grateful that you invited me for the sermon on this special day of remembering.

We cannot take peace in Europe for granted.

We cannot take it for granted that the story of hostility in Europe does not have power anymore. It needs sharing and listening, it needs praying together and seeking for reconciliation to create a future in peace.

I was deeply moved when Alison wrote me that you invite us to preach here in St. Bride's today. Thank you so much for that.

And I would like to deliver you the warmest greetings from my congregation Paulus in Berlin-Lichterfelde.

And now, let us bow over the Bible and try to understand better the message that the Lord has for us today, Jeremiah 29..

**Lost Letters from the Exile**

After 6 months he got the first letter: Jeremiah, it is horrible here: I am missing so much our food, our language. At the very end of the street there is a pomegranate tree. The fruits are about to harvest. It is as tall as the one we used to have in our courtyard. You don't know how much I would like to be home and sit under our pomegranate tree.

Later he got a letter from his former neighbour: Jeremiah, I can't find God anymore. When I walk around the streets there are so many temples for so many different Gods. But our God, where is he? Does he remain with you in Jerusalem?

Do you think I will ever see the graves of my grandparents again? Will I ever see again the sunrise over Jerusalem?

His carpenter wrote:

Jeremiah, it is our fault that we are here, I know. Why didn't we listen to you more carefully? Why didn't we obey the Lord's will? I am so sorry. The Lord has left us. You are not here with us. We lost the battle. We lost the war. We are completely lost.

Jeremiah took a deep breath when he read the letters. He knew that this had to happen. But this did not help him. It did not help them.

Over the years the letters changed. They learned to speak the language better or worse. And still most of the older ones would have preferred to go back to Jerusalem, the sooner the better.

But the younger ones started to make their lives in Babylon.

The former caretaker of the temple wrote to him:

Guess what, Jeremiah: my son wants to marry a local girl! Last Shabbat I was invited to the home of the parents of the girl. They think it is a good idea. My son is a great boy. But marrying someone from here? - I don't know.

### **Seeking an answer I**

Jeremiah read all the letters over and over again: What should he reply? What could he answer? "Lord, what is your will? What do your people need, your people in exile, who are hurt by the war?"

He heard about other prophets, the ones who were driving him nuts while they were in Jerusalem with all the good things they promised, just to be on good terms with the king and the king's mother. How could he counsel his people? He knew that they would need a lot of patience until they could return. - Some will never see home again. How could he help them?

### **Letters to the Front**

During the Great War, so many letters were written. A lot of them are lost. Sometimes we only have one part of the letters. We are unaware of many response. Reading these letters is like looking through a window into those times.

In recent days I was reading some letters written by Christians in Germany to their brothers in the battles during the Great War. I can hear them posing their questions while writing: What helps the soldiers, our brothers in Christ, during their service in a corner of a foreign field? Can I make his faith stronger? Can I offer hope?

Only in very rare moments I can read a hint of doubt: Is Christ really so clearly on the side of the Kaiser? Is it so certain that God is on the side of the Germans? The other soldiers are also young men who belief in Christ and want to be home and live in peace.

If we share the letters of those times I am sure that that together we can learn a lot from them. The letters from those day have a message for us: To remember those who suffered, no matter where they were born or in which language they wrote. They were all human being. God had given life to them. Lest we forget.

### **Remembering WWI**

I come from Germany. We have rarely placed emphasis on remembering World War One. Armistice Day, the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, is not a especial day of rememberence for us. I suppose it is not only because we lost the war. It is not only because the peace that started with the new Republic in

Weimar was not a strong peace. I think our lack of First World War memory is rather a product of the horrors of the Nazi period and the horrors of World War II that destroyed so much and killed so many in Europe and in the world.

In Germany we still face the immense burden of understanding the evil we did to so many people from 33 to 45, that we easily forget to think more carefully about what happened only 20-25 years before - between 14 and 18.

This year is different. - I am very grateful that you in Britain have kept the memories alive during all those years. Those who died and suffered are commemorated by your (dignified) annual remembrance ceremonies. Every Year.

Because the Armistice and the hard won peace at the beginning of the last century has some much to do with the shape of Europe today. We can learn so much from it, what is required to live in peace together. Men and women who suffered greatly during the Great War teach us a lot about what it needs to live in peace together.

### **Berlin – Tel Aviv An exchange of letters**

My newspaper in Berlin, the Berliner Zeitung, is publishing an exchange of letters. A German journalist, Anja Reich, living in Tel Aviv is writing to an Israelite author, Yael Nachshon, living in Berlin and Yael is writing to Anja. In these letters you can read how they seek to understand life in Berlin and life in Israel. They are very personal letters talking about the weather and the food, and also about anti-Semitism in Berlin and weapons and walls in Israel. What can Yael answer when Anja is afraid of all the weapons around her and of exploding bombs? What can help people to live together, no matter where they come from, no matter for how long they have lived in the city?

### **Seeking an answer II**

Jeremiah is not writing about his personal situation, although we would love to know more about it. He does not write about his life in Jerusalem. He wanted to counsel and help the people who survived the conquest of Jerusalem, who were forced to live in the Babylonian exile. Their letters are lost. Maybe their life wasn't that bad?

But they were people far away from the place they were born in, people who were hurt by the war. What can Jeremiah answer? What is the Lord's will?

He was reading the letters over and over again. How could he counsel them? How could he encourage them?

He did not know for how long the exile would last.

Just as he had never known how many years it would take until Jerusalem was destroyed or whether this could be avoided.

One evening he was looking at the stars that God created so long ago. And then he knew. He was hearing the answer. He was listening to God: Seek peace and prosperity in the city you are living in.

He sat himself down and wrote:

### **Jeremiah 29:4-7**

<sup>4</sup>Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon:

<sup>5</sup>Build houses and dwell *in them*; plant gardens and eat their fruit. <sup>6</sup>Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. <sup>7</sup>And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace. (New King James Version)

Seek the peace of the city and pray for it to the Lord.

### **Who is this city?**

Today we are reading this. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city in which you are living in.

Who, what or where is this city? Who are the people living in this city?

Men remembering their grandfathers who died during the war. Men remembering their aunts who saw horrible wounds in the military hospitals and were trying to help.

Women who are missing their husbands in services overseas.

Journalists who are missing their colleague who travelled to Syria to research and write for us back home.

Who, what or where is this city?

Men and women believing boundaries are the best answer to complicated problems.

Children who are sleeping four in one room because their parents cannot afford the rents anymore.

Polish people who are afraid of losing their jobs or right to reside after Brexit.

People who voted “leave” and are looking forward to march next year.

And the ones who are afraid of what is going to happen. Who are thinking about moving somewhere else.

Who is this city?

People who share a cup of tea with a homeless person and support the winter shelter of the church.

People who are afraid that they will need the winter shelter this year for the first time.

People who lived all their life next door. And those who travel to work for two hours very day.

Who is this city? This wonderful lively place, home to so many people?

Jewish and Christians, Muslims and Hindus, believers and nonbelievers. All of them and many more.

Jeremiah writes: Seek the peace of the city.

For us as Christians, what does that mean? How can we do that? What must we do?  
Seek peace and prosperity of the city to which I carried you and pray to the Lord for it.  
Live here, love here, pray and plant gardens.

Could we get any better advice?

Amen.