



True Religion – Jeremiah 7

Many years ago there were quite a few Jews living in the Vatican City in Rome. The pope decided he didn't want them to live there, and said he would give them three days to leave. The Jews challenged the Pope to an intellectual argument. If the Pope won the argument the Jews would leave. If the Jews won the argument then they would be allowed to stay. The Jews leading rabbi, Soli, decided he would take on the pope. However, he stipulated that the argument would be conducted with out using any words. On the appointed day the rabbi sat facing the pope. The pope held up three fingers, to which Soli held up one. The pope then made a circle in the air, to which Soli merely pointed at the ground. The pope then took some bread and a glass of wine and placed them in front of himself. Soli took out an apple and began to eat it. At this point the pope said, "I concede, you have won the argument and you can stay."

The leading Vatican theologians gathered round the pope and said, "How did you loose the argument. "Well", said the pope, "I held up three fingers, representing God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit". "Soli held up one finger, reminding me that there is only one God". "Then I made a circle in the air, to show God is everywhere". "He pointed to the ground to remind us that God is here with us on earth", I then produced the bread & wine as symbols of Mass to show that Jesus died for us". "He produced and apple to remind us that the first Adam sinned so requiring Jesus the second Adam to redeem us from the curse of the Law" "At this point I conceded the argument and allowed the Jews to stay".

In another area of the Vatican, the Jews gathered round Soli. "How did you win the argument", they asked him. "Well", he said, "he held up three fingers reminding us that he gave us three days to leave". "I held up one finger, to state that not one of us would leave the Vatican". "He then made a circle in the air to say we would have to move". "I merely pointed to the ground to state that we were staying put right here in the Vatican". "He then produced his lunch of bread and wine". "So I produced my lunch of one apple" "It was at this point that he conceded the argument, and allowed us to stay".

This story indicates that what you understand I have said is not always what I think I have said. When we communicate between us, we use words to convey what we mean.



One of the chief jobs of prophets like Jeremiah was to declare what God was saying to his people. Maybe the Jews in Judah didn't understand what the Lord was saying to them through Jeremiah in the passage we are looking at tonight, but I somehow doubt that. Jeremiah made it very clear what the Lord was saying to his people at a very critical time in their history.

It may help us if we get the background or context to what Jeremiah is saying to the inhabitants of Jerusalem at this time. So I would like to start by giving my potted history, or overview, of the Old Testament and the children of Israel's story up to the point when Jeremiah spoke in the temple in the passage read today. I will not necessarily cover every point. And I know that most of you will know all of this, but I believe it will be helpful to just go through it again.

In the beginning as we know from Genesis, God created everything, including people. As we know from 'The purpose driven life' we were made for God's pleasure which Rich Warren calls worship. I believe part of this is deep friendship with God, or what is normally called fellowship. God wanted us to know him intimately and us to know him intimately. But as we know Adam and Eve chose to disobey God about eating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And so the friendship or relationship between God and man was broken. The creation also suffered and brokenness came into not only people's lives but into the creation itself. So after the fall people and nations did not know God naturally, they had no knowledge of him. God took action and one of the main thin he did was take a nomadic people and turn them into the nation of Israel. Many Bible historians say that the Exodus is the transition point when Israel became a nation. God entered into a covenant or agreement with the children of Israel. God said to them if you will trust me and me alone and follow my ways then I will bless you and protect you. In particular they were to follow no other so called God's. Their total trust and obedience was to be Yahweh the God of Israel, though he was also to reveal that he was the one and only true God.

Israel was to be a nation unlike any other nation around. Firstly they were not meant to have a human king, as Yahweh was the king of Israel. I never understood this in Sunday school. But if you remember they said they wanted to be like the other nations around them and have a king. God reluctantly gave into their demands even though he knew it would lead to grief in the splitting of the Kingdom. Also Israel unlike the other nations would not have a large standing army. But God would fight for them and despite their military lack of might they would prevail.

Of course God wasn't blessing Israel just for them to have a good time. Israel was meant to be the people through whom God could reveal himself to the other nations, or gentiles. Also it was through Israel that God's final revelation in Jesus would come. He would be the one to restore the broken relationship between God and mankind.

We need to remember when we ask God to bless us, by say pouring his Holy Spirit on us that this is not so that we can have a private good time. From the purpose driven life we will remember that the last 2 purposes are ministry and mission. Yes God always wants to lavish his grace upon us and bless us. But he very much wants this to empower us to serve others and also tell others the good news of Jesus.



But as you may know the kingdom split into two. With the larger kingdom of Israel in the North and the smaller kingdom of Judah in the south. It is in the temple in Judah in the south that we are concerned in our passage today.

Both kingdoms had some good kings who followed the Lord but also they had many bad kings. The main problem for the children of Israel was that they did not follow Yahweh alone but started to follow many of the religions of those around them.

For instance in many place we read about 'high places'. If you are anything like me you just pass it by. But these were an elevated site, usually found on the top of a mountain or hill; most high places were Canaanite places of pagan worship. Much of this worship was occult and totally alien and forbidden by God. In other place we read of Asherah poles. This was all part of the false religion of Baal. Asherah was a fertility goddess, the mother of Baal, whose worship was concentrated in Syria and Canaan and the wooden object that represented her. She was a fertility God. Again Baal along with Asherah is all totally forbidden by the Lord and is of the occult in nature.

Yet time after time the children of Israel followed the other false religions with all their influence from the occult. They even brought it into the worship of Israel from time to time.

The Lord sent the prophets to warn his children about their sin in following these false gods and calling them back the covenant or agreement between the Lord and them.

But in the end the Lord had to punish Israel and allowed them to be invaded and conquered by the **Assyrians**. In **721BC** the capital **Samaria** fell and thousands of Israelites were taken into captivity and Israel ceased to exist as a nation any longer, which just left the southern kingdom of Judah.

Judah fell into the same sins as those of the northern kingdom and came under God's judgement. God had already effectively declared his judgement against Judah in bringing upon themselves the curses of breaking the covenant. In some of the earlier chapters Jeremiah makes clear that God's judgement is already coming from the North. At the beginning of Jeremiah's life a young king called Josiah had found the law in the temple and introduced reform, but unfortunately for them it was too little and too late to save their Kingdom from invasion.

So it is during the last 4 kings of Judah, Josiah, Jehoahaz 2nd, Jehoiakim, Zedekiah that Jeremiah lived. Eventually the Babylonians from the north invaded Judah and in **587BC** Jerusalem fell. The inhabitants of Judah were taken into captivity.

So at the start of Jeremiah 7 the Lord tells him to stand at the gate of the temple and tell the people what the Lord wanted to say to them.

Basically his warning is that as the NIV heads this chapter 'False Religion is worthless'. This mirrors the title of tonight's sermon as 'true religion' in that if we see what false religion is we may more easily follow the path of true religion in the Lord.



There are five areas of false religion that I can see in this speech of Jeremiah in chapter 7. And these are:

- 📖 **Reception or in their case false trust, basically that they were believing deceptive words.**
- 📖 **Repression in that they were shedding innocent blood.**
- 📖 **Religion in their case false religion in that they were going after false Gods.**
- 📖 **Response of them having had hard hearts.**
- 📖 **Repentance or in their case false repentance in the fact that they thought religious duty would excuse their wrong actions or sins.**

Firstly they believed the lying prophets and were accepting their deceptive words we see this in verses 4 & 8. In verse 4 we read:

“This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!”

Jeremiah 7:4 NIV

In verse 8 Jeremiah says:

But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. Jeremiah 7: 8 NIV

From this we may not immediately grasp what the deceptive words are. They come as a commentator says from the ‘Temple theology of the false prophets’. Basically their argument went that the temple was a special place for God. As the temple was in Jerusalem in Judah, the Lord would not destroy Judah that contained the temple that they said was very close to God’s heart.

Next we see the repression or the oppression of innocent people. We find this in verse 6 where Jeremiah says:

If you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place. Jeremiah 7:6 NIV

God is a god of justice and cares about the fair treatment of people. The prophet Micah sets out what the Lord requires when he says:

He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:7 NKJV

God especially hates the people being hurt or even killed or as Jeremiah puts it do not shed innocent blood.



The third area gets right to the heart of the matter and concerns their false religion. We see this particularly in verses 9 & 18. In verse 9 & 10 we read:

“Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord. Jeremiah 7: 9 - 10 NIV

And in verse 18 we read

The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods to provoke me to anger. But am I the one they are provoking? declares the Lord. Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame? Jeremiah 7:18 - 19 NIV

As we have already considered in the history of Israel and now Judah this was probably the major failure or sin. They turned to other so called Gods. Not only is Judah turning to the false religion of Baal and the queen of heaven that is probably Ishtar the Assyro-Babylonian goddess. They are bringing these false religions right into the religious heart of Judah and this is provoking God to anger.

The fourth area is there poor response to the Lord. We see this is in verses 13, 24, 26 & 27. Let me quote just what it says in verse 24.

But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward. Jeremiah 7:24 NIV

They were effectively hardening their hearts. Unfortunately we can so easily do this.

Perhaps they should have listened to what it said in their hymn book:

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. Psalm 95:8 - 9 NIV

Hymns and Christian songs can be a good place for God to speak to us and teach us things we need to know.



Finally they had false repentance or in their case a lack of repentance. We see this in verse 10. We read

You then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things? Jeremiah 7:10a NIV

In fact instead of turning to the Lord in true repentance. They were committing all these sins, particularly of going after false gods and then coming into the temple doing their religious bit before God. They then effectively said well that's ok then we have done our religious duty in the temple and that lets of the hook for all these other wrong things we have done.

Many non-Christians have a similar sort of outlook. Well I know I haven't done everything ok, but I tried to do good occasionally and this will out weigh the bad things I have done. We know this is absolute rubbish, and the truth from God is there is nothing we can do of ourselves to be acceptable and wash away the guilt of our sins. But his outrageous grace expressed in and through Jesus death, deals with the sin and brings us truly into his presence and acceptance.

So Jeremiah is not a very happy chapter in God's story as the prophet confronts his people over their false religion. A people who were not listening and therefore about to be punished by God to get their attention and to try and bring them back to the covenant relationship. If only they had listened and turned from their false religion, they may have been lead into true religion.

Now maybe as we worship in a church that by and large is listening to God and serving him well, we may feel that it has very little to say to us. Paul says of God's word:

How from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the men and women of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:14 -17
NIV

I like that expression able to make you wise. If we read and take to heart the lessons that Jeremiah outlines in his temple speech, maybe we will not fall into similar areas of false religion in our Christian lives and our corporate life here at Meadgate.

Well maybe there are very few people who are putting their trust in Meadgate. But it be very easy to do this. We have a great church here at Meadgate, but I am sure God would say to us as he did to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, don't put your trust in Meadgate. Your trust should be in me. Just because you have a good church doesn't mean that God couldn't bring judgement on us as a church. Now, I am sure that we are not running into that danger. But God's word is given to us to give us wisdom and prevent us doing anything of this nature.



When we think about the area of repression, particularly the shedding of innocent blood, we may feel this has nothing to say to us. But it is important to think how we treat other people as Christians. Do we treat other people fairly and with kindness?

We obviously as far as I know have never actually murdered anyone. If we had we probably wouldn't be here but in prison. But we can just as effectively kill people with words. Harsh words can kill another person in their heart.

One of the problems in this country is that we place so little value on words. This was not so in the Jewish culture. The name you gave a child was very significant. When they greeted each other they would have called down a blessing in Yahweh's name. They would have trusted that because of that the words had power.

My mother used to teach me the following:

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.

This is dangerous rubbish.

Particularly when we are young words can leave deep wounds and tie us up. Think of the young girl who is told by her parents they wanted a boy but got her instead. Or telling a child you are so clumsy you will never get anything right. And we say words have no power. Even now we may be wounding others in their hearts by the careless or hurtful words we speak to them.

Again the area of false religion is one we need to watch. Do we go after false Gods? Many Christians today will read their horoscope in the paper or even play with tarot cards. Hopefully we are not into these things here at Meadgate, but Jeremiah is a warning to stay away from these areas. I heard of a minister who was trying to rejoin the lay lines that ran through his church. And another minister whose wife was studying to be a spiritualist. Although it is not happening here at Meadgate it is happening in some area of the church in this country. And we are part of the church here in England. So like Nehemiah we may need to repent, and intercede on behalf of the whole church to which we belong in this country.

But what is our response to all this. Do we harden our hearts? Do we listen? It is easy to say we don't do that. But I know what I am like. God says to me Graham will you change your ways or Graham will you do this for me. It easy for me not to listen to what he says and ignore it. That is hardening my heart. What a great shame that Judah hardened their hearts to what God said to them particularly through Jeremiah has he stood speaking at the temple gate.

Finally are we really entering into true repentance or do we go through religious exercises that we think will excuse the need to do it. If I go to Meadgate, and say the general confession during the service do I say to myself that will be sufficient to let me off the hook for the things I have done.



This is not the time to start a sermon on repentance. But briefly the word for repentance in Greek is Metanoi. It has about it the sense of to change my mind or to turn about. True repentance is not a shallow religious exercise or grovelling before God crying out sorry sorry!!

I feel it is more like saying to the Lord you are right and I was wrong. And now turn to face you and go your way over this matter in a true and humble spirit of repentance.

So we have seen five areas of false religion that Jeremiah spoke out against at the temple gate in Jerusalem in the heart of Judah. We have briefly seen what these might be saying to us or warning us so that we particularly here at Meadgate do not fall into the sin of false religion. Rather let us always be open to hear the words that come from the heart of the Father brought to us by his Spirit. Thus avoiding false religion in the power of the Spirit we will follow the path of true religion in Jesus.

I would like to finish by singing a song. Many years ago when I was a teenager I was part of a small music group or band that went round youth clubs and fellowships, singing songs as a way of sharing the Gospel. This meant we needed some songs to sing, and so this was one of the songs that I wrote at the time. For inspiration I turned to the Psalms, where it says the fool says there is no God. I am pretty sure we don't have any like that at Meadgate. Others have gone astray. Well maybe a few like that. But the great thing is that Lord is still looking to see if any search after him.

In particular as we have touched on in our looking at what Jeremiah said one of the worst things to do is to harden our hearts. But is great that the Lord is seeking to impart his Spirit. And even more wonderful that Jesus said in response to all this, [Ask and it will be given; Search and you will find; Knock and it will be opened, for the LORD is kind](#). However the song points out that tomorrow is another day. It is very easy to put things off. This is never a good thing to do as Judah found out. Today is always a good day to respond to God. It's a pity the inhabitants of Jerusalem didn't realise that today is the right day to respond to God and tomorrow is indeed another day.

{Sing song: 'The fool says there's no God'}