

WHO'S RIGHT AND WHO'S WRONG?
Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, 2020
Jeremiah 28:5-9

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our First Reading from before, Jeremiah 28:5-9: ⁵ **Then the prophet Jeremiah replied to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the Temple of the LORD.** ⁶ **The prophet Jeremiah said: "Amen! May the LORD do this! May the LORD make your words, which you have prophesied, come true and restore the articles of the Temple of the LORD and all the exiles from Babylon to this place!"** ⁷ **Nevertheless, please listen to this Message, which I am speaking directly to you and to all the people!** ⁸ **'From ancient times the prophets who preceded you and me prophesied war, calamity and the plague against many countries and great kingdoms.** ⁹ **The prophet who prophesies peace is recognised as the prophet whom the LORD has sent when the Message of the prophet comes true."**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

In the midst of all our conversations with the expression of so many opinions, it's interesting how one determines who's right and who's wrong. There is a great deal of "fake news" out there.

So, what is the basis or foundation upon which we are able to consider any information we receive or convey to be right or wrong? For some, that basis is a *written law* which makes life very "black or white." For others, that basis has to do with *an experience* which they feel has taught them a valuable lesson in life. Many determine right or wrong by the demands of a situation or circumstance and the choices involved for an individual, and, since we live in what is called the postmodern age, which is just a term that means there is no absolute truth, others see that truth is *whatever you want it to be*.

Sadly, many people base their concepts of right and wrong on what they *want* to hear at the moment, not necessarily what they *need* to hear at that moment. That's why it's so easy to seek out people who will listen to us gripe and complain about something and then validate our feelings in such a manner as to make us feel like we're in the right and justified for our behaviour! Unfortunately, many times we end up being validated in wrong and destructive behaviours and ideals!

Our text today records an interaction between two prophets - Jeremiah and Hananiah. Jeremiah had the difficult task given him by the LORD to preach judgment, destruction, calamity and eventually slavery in exile to God's people. That is why Jeremiah is often called the "weeping prophet" because the message of coming judgment that God had given to him caused him such anguish.¹ Even so, for more than 40 years, he faithfully proclaimed God's judgment on faithless Judah all the while enduring opposition, beatings and imprisonments.² For this, he is remembered today as an example of someone who remained faithful to God despite countless hardships. Anyhow, who would want that "job?" Because sinners do not like to be told they're wrong, of course, such preaching like that of Jeremiah, would meet with much opposition! However, when we turn away from the LORD in disobedience, that's very serious because it has eternal consequences. God does not delight in punishing sinners, neither does He want people to go to hell³, so He sends His prophet to call people to repent or else judgment will come upon them. Even the purpose of the judgment is to get the people to be humbled so they will finally turn to the LORD in repentance and listen to what He has to say in their lives, instead of what their itching ears want to hear in their sinfulness!

Many times the prophets used "action prophecies" - kind of like object lessons. During Jeremiah's time, the king of Babylon had carried off many Israelites from Jerusalem into captivity. There were some, including Jeremiah and Hananiah, who were still left in Jerusalem, ruled by the king of Babylon. Jeremiah was instructed by the LORD to take a big yoke used for oxen, walk around with this yoke on his neck and prophecy about the people staying under the yoke of slavery in Babylon. However, while Jeremiah was preaching a continued stay in Babylon for God's people, Hananiah was preaching a quick deliverance for them. As the interaction between Jeremiah and Hananiah took place, the people had to figure out who was right and who was wrong because *they were both very convincing*.

Hananiah was actually a false prophet, who was claiming the right to speak in the name of the LORD. A few verses before our text, Hananiah said, "*This is what the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, has said: 'I shall break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'*" ³ *Within two years I shall restore to this place all the articles of the Temple of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, has taken away from this place and taken to Babylon"* (28:2-3). Hananiah was giving the people a false sense of hope and security in their sin by proclaiming that the LORD dealt with sin by giving man a "slap on the wrist." In a very dramatic way, he predicted the return of the Israelites from slavery as Jeremiah 28:10-11 describes: "*Then the prophet Hananiah took the crossbars of the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah and broke them.*" ¹¹ *Hananiah said in the presence of all the people, "This is what the LORD has said: 'In this way I shall break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, from the necks of all the nations within two years.'*" In the midst of such a dramatic scene, who's right and who's wrong?

¹ Jeremiah 4:19-22; 9:1; 13:17

² Jeremiah 11:18-23; 12:6; 18:18; 20:1-3; 26:1-24; 37:11 – 38:28

³ 2 Peter 3:9

However, at a time when the LORD was performing His disciplinary work in the lives of His people, peace was not the right word. It's not that the LORD has something against peace: He is described in the Scriptures as the God of peace.⁴ Instead, He has something against those who profess to give His message when it really isn't His message at all! It is a misuse of His name in a breaking of the 2nd Commandment!

Jeremiah, on the other hand, was the true prophet of the LORD and also claimed the right of saying: "This is what the LORD has said..." - but with a different message. While proclaiming the LORD's deliverance, he proclaimed a more extended stay in exile. He said, "*For this is what the LORD has said: 'As soon as Babylon's seventy years are over, I shall come to take care of you. I shall fulfil My good promise about you and bring you back to this place'*" (Jeremiah 29:10). The captivity would last seventy years, not two years. Imagine that! We have been unable to gather together in worship for a few months and we think that that is tough, but it is a lot less than seventy years!

It's not that Jeremiah wanted to have a seventy-year stay in slavery in Babylon. He even gives that impression when he said to Hananiah: "**Amen! May the LORD do this! May the LORD make your words, which you have prophesied, come true and restore the articles of the Temple of the LORD and all the exiles from Babylon to this place!**" If God does what Hananiah says, great! However, even though God's message through Jeremiah to His people of a seventy-year stay may not have been what anyone wanted to hear, it was still the true and proper message that Jeremiah had to proclaim. Unfortunately, it took the people that long to come to their senses, recognise their hard-heartedness and their sin, repent and turn to the LORD!

The question the people had to answer was: "Who's right and who's wrong?" It's the same question we ask whenever we experience different teachings, opinions, advice and philosophies on a daily basis. Discerning who's right and who's wrong is especially difficult when someone is so convincing with their message. It becomes more complicated when combined with the fact that we like to hear what we want to hear in our sinfulness.

Paul describes our dilemma in 2 Timothy 4:3-4. He says, "*For a time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine. Instead, they will follow their own desires and, because they have itching ears, they will surround themselves more and more with teachers. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.*" People will surround themselves with teachers who tell them what they want to hear, rather than what God declares in His Word.

Dear friends, every day we are faced with trying to determine who's right and who's wrong! The danger of turning away from listening to the truth and wandering off into myths is that it denies the person and work of Jesus Christ who is "*the Way, the Truth, and the Life*" (John 14:6).

When we channel our confusions into areas other than God's Word and will to get the right answers for our lives, we get ourselves into more trouble. Think of all the places where people go to find answers for their lives: mediums, horoscopes, psychics, those who consult the dead, philosophers, famous people: the list is endless. There are all kinds of places where people who are sincerely looking for the answers in their lives go, and many of them lead into more trouble because actually, they're turning away from the LORD, whether they realise it or not!

The prophet Isaiah described it in Isaiah 8:19-22, "*When people tell you, 'Resort to the spirits of the dead and the soothsayers, who whisper and mutter,' should a person not resort to his God? Should he resort to those who are dead on behalf of those who are alive? ²⁰ Resort to the Teaching and to the Testimony! If people do not speak according to this Word, it is because a person has not been intent on it. ²¹ A person will pass through the land when he is dejected and hungry. When he is hungry, he will fall into a rage and curse his king and his God and turn to unfaithfulness. ²² He will look out towards the land and see only distress, darkness and oppressive gloom, while he is led astray in the darkness.*" If people search in the wrong places to find the truth, they will be taken further away from the LORD. Abandoning the Word of God, they will have no hope. The condition they then find themselves in is a judgment of God, but it does not bring them to their senses. Instead, it hardens them and confirms them in their despair. They can find no hope because they have chosen to look in all the wrong places. They have discounted the Word and refuse to listen; eventually, they can't find the Word either. God has removed it. All that remains for them is the final judgment of an eternity in darkness.

Jeremiah pointed this out when he said: "**The prophet who prophesies peace is recognised as the prophet whom the LORD has sent when the Message of the prophet comes true.**" When the Message of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet. Jeremiah was simply reiterating God's Word from Deuteronomy 18:21-22, "*When you ask yourselves, 'How shall we detect the message that the LORD has not spoken?' ²² if what a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD does not happen or come true, that is a message that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it arrogantly. You shall not be afraid of him!*"

Who's right and who's wrong? **God is always right, and He will reveal that He is right - always!** Jesus faced the same struggles as the true prophets of God had faced so many years before Him. When accused of being a fake, and being the servant of the devil, Jesus, who is true God, confirmed His Person and work through His resurrection! God was right! Jesus was right!

As children who have been baptised into Christ's death and resurrection, our understanding of what is right or wrong should not

⁴ Judges 6:24; 1 Corinthians 14:33; Romans 15:33, to name a few.

depend upon what our “itching ears” want to hear at a given moment. Instead, our faith is directed toward the One who reveals in His written Word to us what is right and wrong!

As Jeremiah appealed to the LORD’s timeless and authoritative Word, so we must also test what we hear *according to that same Word*. Jeremiah appealed to the prophets who had preceded him from ancient times. How did he know about those prophets? He was referring to what he knew from the written Word of God - the Scriptures. That’s how he tested the messages and teachings he received from others.

We must always remember that God’s ways of acting are not necessarily our ways. If we insist that He act and think our way, then we run into the struggle of expecting the LORD to give us the answers that we want to hear. Rather, the LORD says, “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways,...*”⁹ “*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts are higher than your thoughts*” (Isaiah 55:8-9). Seeking to understand all things about the ways of the LORD is futile. His plans and reasons are beyond our understanding.⁵

For us, the answer to the question “Who’s right and who’s wrong?” clings to God’s ways - even if it doesn’t match up to our thinking. This is humble and submissive faith. That’s how God defined His relationship with His people in Jeremiah’s day, and that’s His definition of our relationship with Him today as well. In humility and submission, we confess our wickedness in the midst of His holy presence because we know that He’s right and we’re wrong. We confess our sins based upon His righteousness in the Person and work of Jesus. The search for who’s right and who’s wrong takes us to the cross and the open tomb revealed to us in His written Word.

When we view things from God’s ways as revealed in His written Word, then we trust His will to be accomplished in His time, no matter how it “matches up” to our own way of thinking. We confess with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “*Not My will, but Yours be done*” (Luke 22:42).

In the meantime, we strive to do what we know is His will according to His written Word because He has fulfilled that Word in Jesus Christ. We recognise that our lives are a constant faith walk where we search for and trust God based upon this written Word. He is always righteous! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord our God, You are our strength and our joy, for everything You do is marked by kindness and love. Because You are gracious, we trust in You and offer You our prayers.

We thank and praise You for all Your kindness to us: for blessing us with life, for equipping us with all our powers of body and soul, for giving us the ability to be useful, for permitting us to enjoy Your creation, and for surrounding us with the warmth of human relationships in every facet of life.

We confess our sins before You, repent of them, and earnestly turn from them. Do not look on us in anger, for Jesus’ sake. We praise You above all else for Your grace in Christ Jesus. You have sent Your Son to die on the cross, and have raised Him in power and glory, to provide all the riches of our salvation. In Him You have given us free pardon for all our sins, the strength to overcome evil, and the sure hope of eternal life.

We rejoice in the death of Your Son, through which you have been reconciled to us, so that we may approach You as a God of love. Comfort us with Your free forgiveness, and fill us with the new life of the Spirit. Help us to be alert and to stand firm in faith in every temptation and test, so that we may resist Satan and His evil tricks, and hold our ground against all evil.

Be gracious to Your Church, O God, that it may seek the lost, lift up the fallen, comfort the broken-hearted, and heal the afflicted. Enable Your pastors and people to proclaim with courage and conviction the message of life in Christ Jesus, and to declare to all people Your mighty acts of judgment and mercy. Cause growth among us, through Your powerful Word.

Reveal Your power to all lands and nations. Remind people everywhere that You are the Lord of all history, that You judge the leaders of the nations, and that You have the power to break bows, shatter spears, and destroy all human might. Grant that all people may turn to You and follow Your truth.

Be the heavenly guest in all our homes. Move all families to trust You in everything, and to love and serve each other, until that day comes when You call us from our homes on earth to live with You in our heavenly home for ever.

Bless all who are in any need of body or soul. Teach them to humble themselves under Your mighty hand, trusting that You remove all burdens in Your own good time. Teach them to place all their worries on You, and assure them of Your infinite understanding and loving care.

Gracious God, since You have called us to share eternal glory in Christ, make us strong, and make our lives holy. Hear our prayers for the sake of Jesus, to whom be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

⁵ Job 38:1-40:2; Romans 11:33-36

4th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8)

Jeremiah 28:5-9

⁵ Then the prophet Jeremiah replied to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the Temple of the LORD. ⁶ The prophet Jeremiah said: "Amen! May the LORD do this! May the LORD make your words, which you have prophesied, come true and restore the articles of the Temple of the LORD and all the exiles from Babylon to this place!" ⁷ Nevertheless, please listen to this Message, which I am speaking directly to you and to all the people! ⁸ "From ancient times the prophets who preceded you and me prophesied war, calamity and the plague against many countries and great kingdoms. ⁹ The prophet who prophesies peace is recognised as the prophet whom the LORD has sent when the Message of the prophet comes true."

Romans 7:1-13

¹ Or do you not know, fellow-Christians (for I am speaking to people who know the Law) that the Law controls a person only while he is still alive? ² For the woman who has a husband has been bound by the Law to her husband while he is alive. However, if her husband dies, she has been released from the Law that binds her to her husband. ³ Therefore, while her husband is alive, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man. However, if her husband dies, she is free from the Law, with the result that she is not an adulteress if she marries another man. ⁴ Therefore, fellow-Christians, you too have been put to death in relation to the Law through the body of Christ, with the result that you have begun to belong to Another, to Him who has been raised from the dead, that we may bear fruit to God. ⁵ For, while we were in the sinful human nature, the sinful passions that were aroused by the Law were at work in our members, that we produced fruit for death. ⁶ However, now we have been released from the Law, because we have died to what we were being bound by, with the result that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

⁷ What shall we say, then? Is the Law sin? Certainly not! Rather, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law. For I would not have known covetousness if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet!" ⁸ However, sin took an opportunity through the Commandment and produced in me every kind of covetousness. For sin is dead without the Law. ⁹ Once I used to be alive without the Law; but, when the Commandment came, sin became

alive, and I died. ¹⁰ The very Commandment that was intended to lead to life was found in my case to lead to death. ¹¹ For sin took an opportunity through the Commandment, deceived me and through the Commandment killed me. ¹² Therefore, the Law is holy, and the Commandment is holy, righteous and good. ¹³ So, did this good thing cause death for me? Certainly not! Rather, that sin might be recognised as sin, it was producing death for me through what is good, that sin might become extremely sinful through the Commandment.

Matthew 10:34-42

³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth! I have not come to bring peace but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ A person's enemies will be those in his own home.

³⁷ "Anyone who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and anyone who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁸ The person who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. ³⁹ The one who has found his life will lose it, but the one who has lost his life for My sake will find it.

⁴⁰ "He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who has sent Me. ⁴¹ He who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. He who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. ⁴² Whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I tell you, will certainly not lose his reward