

Do Not Become Discouraged

When we look at our nation, it is easy to get quite discouraged. For example, we are almost at a trillion dollars in debt as a nation. House prices are through the roof – not to mention a shortage of housing to begin with! Real inflation is sitting around 3-4%. Socially, things are also chaotic – you can't turn the television on without getting blindsided by woke ideology. But things are not as bad as they seem.

Perhaps things are better when we look at the Church. Tragically, though, things are not any better when we look at churches here in Australia. Religious service attendance in Australia has never been practised by the majority. Some of the highest rates of attendance were recorded in the 1950s after World War II, at the time of the baby boom (44% in 1950). Today, according to the National Church Life Survey, around one in five Australians (21%) reported attending religious services frequently, i.e., at least monthly. Among frequent attenders, 13% attended weekly or more often. A further 30% of Australians were infrequent attenders: this is made up of 12% who go once or a few times a year and 18% who attend less than yearly. Around half of all Australians (49%) reported that they never attend religious services. And so, as we look at the church, things are not good but bad. But again, things are not as bad as they seem.

How can it not be as bad as it seems? After all, everything seems to be falling into decomposing rubble, like a rotting tree, yet we need not worry. The reason why? Many leaders in the Christian church and the state preach in pulpits and podiums that everything will turn out fine. They are saying that nothing bad will ever happen to you. That is right; contrary to all appearances, they tell you that what you see isn't that bad. They are telling you that you will be safe and secure - no harm will come upon you.

But deep down, you and I know that they are lying. We would like to believe them, but deep down, we look around and know they are wrong. We know beneath these leader's imaginary words that they are just a bunch of scared people, just like us. But again, with all of this said, things are not as bad as they seem.

Let's go back to the time of Jeremiah. Things were not good in the nation of Judah. During the time of Jeremiah, the nation of Israel had been split into two kingdoms – the northern kingdom was called Israel, and the southern kingdom was called Judah. Long story short, several years earlier, a mighty nation called Assyria invaded Israel and deported many Israelites. The Israelites were scattered across the Assyrian Empire to suppress resistance and keep control. Fast-forward to the time of Jeremiah. During Jeremiah's time in Judah, they faced a similar threat. The mighty nation of Babylon had already deported many citizens in Judah, and it was about to happen again. Also, on the horizon, the Babylonians would soon enter Jerusalem and destroy the Temple. Needless to say, the people were under the thumb of Babylon, waiting to be crushed and ground into rubble. The nations of Israel and Judah were like fallen trees – they were like rotten decomposed stumps. But again, things were not as bad as they seemed.

So, this begs the question, why were things not as bad as they seemed?

We often put our trust in rulers, the government, leaders, institutions, and systems to save us and help us feel secure. The problem is that rulers, the government, leaders, institutions, and systems are powerless to deliver salvation to us. Psalm 146:3-4 says to us, "*Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation. When his breath departs, he returns to the earth; on that very day his plans perish.*" In fact, as history has shown us time and time again, rulers die, governments topple, and religious institutions crumble. They don't have what it takes for when they die. Their projects, promises, and great plans die with them. But again, things are not as bad as they seem.

Returning to Jeremiah, he says something profound that we must note. He says, "*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and He shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely*" (23:5-6).

What Jeremiah is telling the people of Judah is that despite everything they see, there is assurance and hope. That is to say, Jeremiah does not lie to them as the other lying prophets did. Jeremiah was not preaching an 'Everything will turn out fine' sermon. Furthermore, he is not trying to prop up the failing rulers and the toppling government or peddle false and empty promises of salvation in an institutional program. Instead, Jeremiah announced that amid the fallen trees of Israel and Judah – in the midst of the decaying stumps - there was a sprouting branch.

It is important to pause here for a moment and understand exactly what Jeremiah is saying. He uses a metaphor of a dead stump and a new sprouting branch. In other words, he is not saying that the dead stump of Israel and Judah will sprout into a brand-new tree. As history will show us, things are about to get much worse for the nation of Judah. Instead, Jeremiah is telling the people that there is a new shoot – a new growth – a branch that is growing up amid the chaos, decay, and blunder. Jeremiah speaks into the failed states of Judah and Israel; he speaks over the lying pastors; and he

speaks into the impending doom of Babylon's invasion and says that a truly righteous ruler – a King – is coming. The coming King will have royal power and will make use of that power and authority to take care of His kingdom with wisdom and power. That king is none other than Jesus Christ Himself. Yes, you heard that correctly; the branch, the sprout, and the new shoot are referring to Jesus Christ.

Whether it is ancient Israel or Judah on the verge of being destroyed, or whether it is us in the 21st century feeling as if everything is going to slip away in our country, or if it is us in the church thinking that the institutional church may not see better days – hear what Jeremiah has proclaimed: **in the midst of the failed projects, fallen governments, dying institutions, false political promises of the world, there is a Righteous Branch.** There is a new sprouting branch. That Righteous Branch sprouted in Bethlehem that Christmas long ago. Indeed, the Righteous King came that Christmas long ago to establish a kingdom that has no end. The Righteous King was born into the chaos, rubble, and struggles of an unstable world to accomplish eternal salvation for you, for me, and for the entire world. And so, whatever comes your way, whether good or bad, know today that you do not need to put your trust in rulers, the government, leaders, institutions, and systems to save you and help you feel secure.

Things are never as bad as they seem because you have Christ, and Christ has you. He is the Righteous Branch, and you belong to His eternal Kingdom. He is the One who rules despite what we see going on in this world. And so, come what may, you have Christ. It is the sprouted righteous branch for you.

This country may very well fail, or it may not. The AELC may not survive, or it may. The Church in Australia may diminish in numbers, or it may not. Any one of our church buildings may close its doors, or it may not. We may see worse days ahead, or we may not. But none of that matters because we do not put our trust in what we see. We do not put our faith in rulers, the government, leaders, institutions, and systems to save us and make us feel secure, but we trust in Christ, who established His Kingdom through His birth, life, death, and resurrection. We trust in Jesus, who rules at the Father's right hand and is coming back for us on the Last Day.