

## Article: Jesus – The LORD Our Righteousness

Our First Reading today came from the Book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is known as the suffering prophet and existed during a time when judgment had come upon Jerusalem for its sin. Jerusalem's spiritual leaders were spiritually bankrupt; they were heretical, and they did not defend the cause of the poor and needy. They sought dishonest gain, oppressed the innocent and extorted from those they were responsible for. The people were in constant rebellion. Slavery and forced labour were practised. There was a lack of contentment with the necessities of life, joined with the continual lust for more and more and more. Thus, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was a judgment against them for their sin; it was God disciplining the people of Jerusalem. As a result, Jeremiah painfully watched the city get destroyed and painfully watched as the religious leaders proclaimed false messages of hope.

In the beginning portions of today's reading, we read a harsh rebuke to the religious leaders who ruled during the time of Jeremiah. God addresses these religious leaders as "shepherds," which is equivalent to our understanding of "pastors" today. More specifically, God, through the prophet Jeremiah, calls the religious leaders onto the carpet. He exposes them by saying that they are not shepherding the people of Israel but destroying and scattering them. These are serious words; God certainly did not mince any words. "(You) *are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture... You have scattered My flock, driven them away and have not taken care of them*" (Jeremiah 23:2).

More specifically, what were they doing that was so detrimental to the people of Israel? As we examine the Old Testament Scriptures, we see in Ezekiel, who was a contemporary of Jeremiah, that these Old Testament shepherds were not feeding the flock but were feeding themselves (Ezekiel 34). They were exploiting the people. They were fat shepherds with famished sheep. You get the picture.

Now, for the most part, each and every one of us can pick out the abuses of shepherds/pastors in the news, and as we read the scriptures of the Old Testament, we can point and say, "*Now that is wrong. That is not what a shepherd is to do and be.*" But more subtly, some things caused God to rebuke the shepherds in Jeremiah's day, things that the average person probably wouldn't notice unless it is pointed out. As we look at Ezekiel chapter 13, we see that these false shepherds, these false prophets, followed their own hearts and proclaimed messages from false visions. In other words, their message was not of the Holy Spirit and God's Word. Their messages were conjured up in the caverns of their own hearts and their own imaginations. Because their messages originated within themselves, it is no wonder why they spoke false things and led the people astray. It is no wonder why the sheep were famished, for only the Word of God feeds souls, not messages that originate from the deep caverns of a shepherds subjective feelings and thoughts. These teachers gave way to their own imaginations and their own fancy. Legitimate Old Testament Prophets did not speak their own message but a message that was outside of themselves - a message that God gave them. The legitimate prophets were called, and most of the time, they did not want to proclaim the message from God because it did not mean fortune and fame but pain and persecution. The same goes for us here and now in today's world. Pastors are to proclaim the scriptural truths of the Word, in season and out of season. When it is popular and when it is not.

Now, here is where it gets even worse and, frankly, very dangerous. In Jeremiah 6:14 and in Ezekiel 13:10, we see that these false shepherds failed to tell the people how sick they really were, claiming that all was well; they put band-aids on the people's cancerous wounds. In other words, they proclaimed, "Peace, Peace," when there was no peace. These false shepherds proclaimed that there would be peace in the land and that the people were going to enjoy great prosperity when no such thing would come to pass. They were proclaiming a message exactly 180 degrees the opposite of reality.

We all crave messages of peace. We desire good news in a bad-news world. This was the desire of the people of Israel, to have a message of peace, and this was the message that they were given by the false shepherds. You see, the true shepherds called out sin, but the false prophets flattered the people with smooth words. The false shepherds minimised sin and guilt, which put alarmed consciences to sleep. The false shepherds taught the people that they should always presume God's favour and assume that God would never bring about suffering in Jerusalem. The false shepherds would proclaim pleasant messages and smooth/happy doctrines. However, these smooth doctrines and their smooth talk did not make a smooth and happy reality.

Amazingly, the Apostle Paul says to the young Timothy in his Second Letter, "*I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry*" (4:1-8).

There is always an inclination for each and every one of us to want our ears to be itched. We want to hear what brings peace. Not only are the bad shepherds to blame for this but, the sheep of the flock, people like you and me, will try and accumulate pastors and teachers to tell us what we want to hear, what will itch our ears. We want good news in a bad-news world.

As we listen to Jeremiah, it seems as if all is lost. It would also seem from looking at Jeremiah that he is a simple downer. “*Does he have any hope or just messages of doom and gloom?*” No, the message does not end with these faithless shepherds. Jeremiah doesn’t leave us with just bad news, and we are then expected to sort out all the trouble. No, God promises something great and something profound. God promises that He will raise up a Righteous Servant for the people, a Righteous Shepherd.

Now, very specifically, this verse contains a term that is so important for us to understand. It is the term, “*Branch.*” God says that He will raise up a “*righteous Branch.*” This metaphor is not a branch in the sense that we would think of one. The branch that God will raise forth is not dependent upon a fully grown tree for strength and life. Rather, this branch that Jeremiah mentions grows out of a dying stump or from the ground where a tree has recently decayed. It is a fresh, new growth with its own strength and life. True, it comes from the dead and decaying tree or bush, but it is in itself something new and independent. Jesus is the new growth that is promised, who will come forth out of the decay, depravity and chaos of Israel. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who came for the whole world.

Notice how Jeremiah doesn’t proclaim peace when there was none. But he does proclaim God’s message of peace. He proclaims peace that is found outside of the circumstances of life; he proclaims the coming Christ who will bring ultimate and true peace.

This righteous Branch will save His people. Jesus will be called by the name “*The LORD Our Righteousness.*” This reminds us of God’s great exchange (Isa 53:4–6; 2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus, who is perfect Righteousness, lived a perfect life for us and then suffered and died to pay for our sins. He alone is inherently righteous and perfect. He alone lived a perfect life in total obedience to God’s commands. Not only did He act and speak perfectly, but He even thought perfectly. God accepted this as full payment for sin and declared the world righteous for Jesus’ sake. Now, all who by faith receive Him are assured of eternal heaven.

Think about this for a moment: it would do little good for God to replace Israel’s bad shepherds with other earthly rulers. The reason is that mankind has repeatedly affirmed and shown that we cannot lift ourselves out of the quicksand of sinful corruption. Israel was not able to fix herself. Rather, God Himself must come to the rescue, which He did in the person of His Son and in the power of His Holy Spirit. God not only promised in the Old Testament that He would send the Good Shepherd, Christ, to be the Shepherd of the Sheep, but He actually did this. It is a historical reality. Just as the coming Righteous Branch casts out fear and gives comfort, we too do not have to fear, for we can rest with confidence and serve with confidence that our Good Shepherd is sufficient and able to deliver us from evil. Just as they looked forward to the coming age, we look back to Christ. If God is to break the power and reign of sin, He must send into this world Christ, His servant who is fully human and a fully divine Shepherd. Jesus is the One who will not destroy the sheep but feed them with bread from heaven. He came not to be served but to serve you and me! He is the Good Shepherd; fear not, for He is with you and me.