



# RESOURCES FOR WORSHIP

## *Reflections on the Lections for the Day*

26<sup>th</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2004,  
PENTECOST 17/PROPER 21 (26) YEAR C

### JEREMIAH 32:1-15

The lectionary suggests omitting verses 3b-5, but these verses are highly significant for the question of security and so are included here.

The theme of this reading is hope in the face of an apparently hopeless situation. It is not, however, a hope that relies on false patriotism and divorcing oneself from reality, but the hope that comes from putting one's faith in God, even when world events seem to leave no room for hope.

The people of Jerusalem would have seen Babylon as rich, militarily powerful, barbaric and wanting to control the world – an imperialist nation sweeping through the Middle East. The Babylonian army has laid siege to Jerusalem, capital city and seat of power in Judah, the site of both the King's palace and God's Temple. Jerusalem has always been a place of refuge, a hill that can be defended from its strong walls. Now it is about to fall. Is this the end of the world?

Jeremiah has pronounced words of doom and gloom. The city is about to fall. There is no escape for the King. Worst of all, Jeremiah names this as God's will. The King's future is in God's hands. There is nothing he can do. In Old Testament theology, the King is a representative of God. Through the King, the nation is blessed. The exile of the King, and his death (which Zedekiah does not know about in the story, but those who first edited and read this book certainly knew had occurred), is a calamity for the city and the nation.

The King cannot silence Jeremiah, but he hates his words. So Jeremiah is confined to the palace. This perhaps is not surprising – prophets were seen as people whose words were powerful, bringing about the fate that they proclaimed. So Jeremiah is seen as a traitor, serving Babylonian interests.

But to see Jeremiah as bringing about the fall of Jerusalem is wrong. Historically, it is hard to imagine any other outcome. Judah was not a strong nation. Theologically, it is not the words of Jeremiah that bring about Jerusalem's demise, but God. Jeremiah is merely the messenger and God would surely act even if Jeremiah were silent.

So the situation seems hopeless. World events will take their course and there is nothing to be done to stop them. But the rest of the reading shows that Jeremiah is no traitor. In the face of defeat and hopelessness he goes out and buys a field. The whole social, legal, political and commercial fab-

ric of the nation is collapsing and about to be replaced by foreign occupation, but Jeremiah, in an act of faith and hope, goes out to buy a field and ensures that all the legal niceties have been properly done. His real message is not the doom of the nation, but its future life. World events are not the last word. God can and does bring new life to nations and communities.

Some of this seems very strange to us. We need to discern what were the ways of thinking that belonged uniquely to that time and place, and what is of permanent value. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is the God of all humankind, who does not plot against people or use violence. Jeremiah correctly interprets the reality, but we cannot follow his example of viewing wars and sieges as God's will. God created all humankind, and Christ by his life, death and resurrection redeems all humankind. Christians are found in every nation. In our own time, a God who uses armies would be a God who fights against believers.

But the action of Jeremiah in buying a field is testimony of permanent significance. Jeremiah's action declared that God would bring new life out of defeat and chaos. Security is not to be found in armies, political power or the winning or losing of wars. Security is found in God and through God it is found in humans committing themselves to having a future and finding ways of surviving and rebuilding community. In fact, this story is really a promise of resurrection – that life can come even in situations of hopelessness. When we nurture that hope in a new future, and that faith in God and in human resilience, then we have security that cannot be destroyed by world events.

How often do political rulers in our own day want the churches to say only what the politicians want to hear. The role of the church, and Christians, like the role of Jeremiah, is not to say what politicians want to hear, not to offer false blessing that accepts their use of violence and not to offer false hope and false security. The role of the church is to explain that God is not constrained by human armies and events, but continues to offer life to the world and to foster human community in the face of violence and hopelessness – in other words, to challenge false views of security and promote a more human, more ethical and more hopeful view of the future. This is the prophetic role of the church – not so much to condemn, as to point to a different understanding of how life is preserved, protected and nurtured and how communities have a future.

## AMOS 6:1A, 4-7

Amos challenges the security of the wealthy, who think that lifestyle is everything. They have one form of security. We know from archaeology that they lived in large houses, and the prophet himself describes their rich food as a symbol of their self-indulgence, and their laziness. We Australians do not normally think of ourselves in this way, but how do we appear to people in the poorest and least developed nations of the world? Is there any difference between the lifestyle described by Amos and the sort of lifestyle promoted through TV shows, motivational seminars, and media articles that give the impression that all of us can and should aspire to the “security” of large bank balances, luxurious houses, and lifestyles where work is either unnecessary or focuses only on making yet more money.

There is no subtlety here. Amos simply condemns such lifestyle, and such an approach to life. Materialism is not a modern invention. Neither is looking after one's own household while ignoring the needs of others. It was immoral in Amos' time, and it is immoral today. Amos announces that there is no security in this lifestyle. Those who eat, drink and make merry in their nice houses while the rest of the nation and the rest of the world struggle for survival will find that riches are a false form of security. Only in human community and by ensuring a just and compassionate society is there true security.

## PSALM 91:1-6, 14-16

This is a psalm of assurance, a celebration of the security experienced by those who love God and let their lives be shaped by that love. We might protest that the psalm is unrealistic, since those who put their faith in God do get sick, experience illness and disability, and find themselves caught up in wars and violence. But at another level the psalm is absolutely true. We can live our lives in fear and paranoia, terrified of who might attack us or what might befall us, and seeking to keep all terrors at a distance. That way leads to ever more complex and stringent “security” precautions and use of violence, along the lines set out in our sections on policing, excision of islands and star wars in this kit. Or we can put our faith in God and get on with life, not because God puts a security bubble around us, but because faith in God gives us a resilience that names fears for what they are and says that life can be lived in hope instead of fear. If our faith is in God, then terrorists do not have the last word and do not shape our lives. If our faith is in God, then we can reach out to other people instead of being afraid that they will betray us or diminish us. If our faith is in God, then we do not need to rely on ever more powerful weapons and ever more punitive use of violence to keep ourselves safe. Our security is in God, not in human systems and things. This frees us to be human and to embrace life in all its uncertainty and dangers.

## PSALM 146

This is a psalm of praise and exultation. At the same time it is highly political. “Do not put your trust in princes”. Put your faith in the God of justice and liberation, the God who cares for the poor and looks after the hungry, the God who cares for those in prison and for the strangers, the God who brings the wicked to ruin.

Interestingly, the psalm does not define what it is that the wicked do, what it is that brings ruin. That is left to us to figure out by contrast with what one does if one finds one's help in the God of justice and liberation.

As in other readings, the issue is about where we find our security. Is it in the God of justice and liberation, and the way of life that follows from faith in that God, or is it in human systems that deny God, deny justice and liberation, and depend on violence and oppression?

Our security, according to this psalm is not to be found in God being on our side. It is found in the nature of God as the God of justice and liberation, the God who cares for those who are oppressed and harmed by human ways of using power and wealth.

Our security is in living life shaped by this God. If God is on the side of the oppressed and those in prison, then we find our security by being on their side as well, by acting in solidarity with them and compassion for them. The alternative is to go the way of the wicked, which leads to insecurity and ruin.

We are called to rejoice in the nature of God, praising God, and letting our faith in and knowledge of God shape the way we interact with other human beings. It is about spirituality, about living by faith.

## 1 TIMOTHY 6:6-19

We don't know quite what Timothy would have made of this advice two thousand years ago, but it is good advice today. We are bombarded with media messages that we should not feel content. Advertisements urge us to want more and to believe that we deserve the best. Success gurus entice us to seminars to learn how to make more money and get more of what we want out of life. Casino and lottery advertisements encourage us to put our hope in the big win. TV shows depict people being transformed by new clothes, plastic surgery, home renovations, or all three. We are urged to map out our career paths and move from job to job, as if work only has meaning when it is accompanied by more money, more status and more power. Making us discontent is now an industry in its own right.

We therefore do well to remember the advice that "there is great gain in contentment". When we give in to the temptations of the 21st century, we are doomed to disappointment, discontent and insecurity, because most people will never earn above average earnings, never have access to exclusive holiday resorts, and never be at the top of their profession.

As Timothy's advisor says, what is really needed is contentment and godliness, an awareness that the purpose and goal of life is not what we accumulate, but who we are in our innermost being. For most of us, this is very good news, relieving us of the most terrible demands of the 21st century. We don't have to have it all. Money is not the key to life. Our security does not depend on what the world calls success. It depends on God. We find security when we embrace the values and attitudes that flow from faith in God and build human community: good works, generosity, and willingness to share.

Most church members do not consider themselves rich. Some are quite poor. But we can all live as if we are rich, by embracing these fundamental values. We can reach out to other people with a generous love and respect for others, and share what we have. We can be hospitable. Even those that we think have least, such as the homeless, do so. Even those on low incomes sometimes offer financial help to someone with less than themselves. A helpful way of expressing our belief that God is our security, not money, is to give a proportion of our income to others, for example by supporting church social services, aid agencies or local community groups, and to increase that proportion as our income and assets increase.

## LUKE 16:19-31

This reading offers us a healthy new perspective on all questions of security. The rich man certainly had security on earth – security of fine clothing, fine food and fine housing. But he lacked any understanding of what was of permanent significance. He spends eternity knowing what he could and should have done – but failed to do. How could one have a poor man at one's table, and fail to offer even the scraps? How could you fail to safeguard the person from the dogs? Or fail to tend the sores? It would have taken so little. In offering Lazarus security, the rich man could have given himself true security as well – the security of being a compassionate human being, offering hospitality and security to others and therefore having nothing to fear about his own human and spiritual identity and status. This is a challenge of faith – it is about recognising that if we seek our own security by excluding others, then we destroy that security and make our own lives meaningless. It is about recognising that those who are heartless end up nameless and without identity, while those who like Lazarus survive in an inhospitable society, end up with a dignity that is worth naming and remembering.

The message of this text is clear – if you want ultimate security, the security of a life in which you do not need to feel shame before God, or your fellow human beings, or your own remembrances in old age, then act as neighbour. Do what you have the resources to do. Being neighbour may mean caring for those who come to your door and need your personal hospitality. It means responding to those who flee across the seas to seek asylum in Australia, and not closing off our borders, locking them up in detention centres or manipulating refugee assessment processes for political ends. It means demanding proper care for the people who are mentally ill, demanding adequate funding for public education including alternative education and literacy classes, instead of relying on policing to control those who are excluded from mainstream society. It means responding to the stories told to us by our church community service agencies who care for the poor and vulnerable in our own communities, or our church development agencies who care for poor communities overseas. It means doing voluntary work with one of these agencies or offering financial support. But it may also mean asking: how did this man come to be poor and covered with sores? Why are there poor people in an affluent nation like Australia? How can we end poverty? In a world where there is more than enough food for everyone, why do people starve or die of infectious diseases that have been eradicated from affluent nations? How can we stop the violence, torture and persecution from which people flee?

# Prayers

## *Gathering prayer*

We join together

Anticipating new ways  
of being together  
of seeking justice in our world  
of finding peace in troubled times.

Acknowledging  
our failure to act for change  
the seeming hopelessness of world events  
and the presence of our God with us.

God of justice and peace,  
your caring ways reach out to us at this time  
Be present with us today  
as we reflect on violence and injustice in our world,  
and our response to your call to bring peace.<sup>1</sup>

## *Prayers for reconciliation and peace*

In the midst of conflict and division,  
we know it is you  
who turns our minds to thoughts of peace.  
Your spirit changes our hearts:  
enemies begin to speak to one another,  
those who were estranged join hands in friendship,  
and nations seek the way of peace together.  
Let your spirit be at work in us.  
Give us understanding and put an end to strife,  
fill us with mercy and overcome our denial,  
grant us wisdom and teach us to learn  
from the people of the land.  
Call us to justice.

Amen.<sup>2</sup>

God of Holy Justice,  
you enflame our hearts with righteous anger,  
and breathe upon us the gentleness of your peace.  
In this trying hour,  
give us care for one another,  
commitment to others,  
and courage to challenge the powers of evil:  
that we may comfort the afflicted,  
and afflict the comfortable,  
transforming our world's warring madness.  
In the name of Jesus Christ,  
who, riding on a donkey,  
turned the world upside down.

Amen.<sup>3</sup>

God of peace and reconciliation  
break through the fears and insecurities  
which mar our relationships.  
Bring to our homes  
renewed understanding and love,  
and to our troubled world  
fresh visions of peace.  
Curb our warring madness,  
transform our greed and selfishness  
and give us hearts for you alone.  
For your love's sake

Amen.<sup>4</sup>

## *Prayer for today*

Creator of the universe,  
we pray in gratitude and praise.  
You were there at the beginning of all things,  
shaping our world, and preparing it for us.  
You have provided the mountains and the trees,  
the waters and the earth.  
Help us to be caretakers of your gifts,  
protecting the land from abuse,  
and ready to share with all in need.  
Show us how to use our science and technology  
in creative, not destructive ways.  
Deepen our awareness of our connectedness  
with all your creation,  
so that future generations will also enjoy every blessing.

Amen.<sup>5</sup>

## *Promise for peace*

I promise:  
to respect myself and others;  
to communicate honestly and positively;  
to listen carefully to the other, especially to those with whom  
I disagree;  
to forgive others and to apologise and make amends when I  
hurt another;  
to respect God's creation  
and treat the environment and all living things with respect  
and care;  
to pursue healthy activities and entertainment  
which promote a more joyful and less violent society;  
to act courageously and to challenge violence in all its forms  
whenever I encounter it,  
and to stand with others who are treated unfairly,  
even if it means standing alone.<sup>6</sup>

## *Prayer of confession*

God of love, compassion and justice,  
look on us your servants and have mercy on us.  
We come before you as people who have read your Word,  
have listened to its message,  
and yet have allowed injustice to exist all around us.  
Too often we mistake right intentions for right action.  
Too often we choose the easy path  
rather than struggle for what is right.  
Too often we regard life as a choice between good and bad  
rather than between good and better,  
or between bad and worse.  
Where we have failed to judge aright, Lord forgive.  
Where we have stood by as wrong has triumphed,  
Lord forgive.  
Where we have chosen the easy path  
rather than that of right, Lord forgive.  
Give us the strength to do justice, to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with you.<sup>7</sup>

## *Prayer of confession*

Loving God, we confess to you what we are:  
hesitant, unsure and easily led from your way.  
In your Son you promised freedom from fear,  
if we would only love and trust.  
In your Son you showed us what true security means –  
taking up the Cross and setting aside the sword.  
We confess that we have allowed ourselves to be seduced,  
and to settle for a false sense of security.  
We have put our trust in that which allures but does not satisfy,  
and have sought safety in laws and regulations.  
Lord, in your mercy, forgive.<sup>8</sup>

## *Litany for peace*

God of all peace, in you we find our security:  
you created the world and declared it good.  
You made us in your own image  
and your Spirit gives breath to all that lives.  
**God of life, our security is in you alone.**

God of all peace, in you we find our security:  
through Jesus Christ, you offered your gift of love.  
In Jesus the barriers that separate us from each other  
are brought down  
And we remember that we are all called children of God.  
**God of love, our security is in you alone.**

God of all peace, in you we find our security:  
through the prophets you have cried out for justice.  
You call us to work together for justice in this world  
that the poor will be fed and the oppressed set free.  
**God of justice, our security is in you alone.**

God of all peace, in you we find our security:  
you are our hope in the midst of despair.  
**Strengthen our faith and secure our hearts  
that we might be your faithful disciples.  
In the name of the Christ we pray.**

Amen.<sup>9</sup>

## *Peace at all costs*

Loving God,  
help us to be true:  
to see the truth of our brokenness,  
hear the truth of our pain,  
and speak the truth of our violence,  
regardless of the cost.

Loving God,  
help us to be merciful:  
to open our hearts to everyone we meet,  
to reach out our hands with compassion,  
and offer love without condition.

Loving God,  
help us to be just:  
to transform our violent world –  
overturning the systems and structures of oppression  
and bringing justice to all creation.

Loving God,  
help us to be community:  
to live together in trust –  
all people and all creation,  
reconciled and renewed in your grace,  
a world of peace.  
Now and forever.

Amen.<sup>10</sup>

## ***Litany of Longing - for peace and justice***

*Candle for the continuing presence of God [white]*

We light a candle to acknowledge God's presence with us.  
Be close to us, loving God,  
as you have been with people down through history.  
In these uncertain times when we fear for our future  
give us strength and resolve  
to act with honour and courage  
as bearers of your love.

*Candle for seeking justice [purple]*  
*Read: Psalm 146*

We light a candle for justice.  
Sustain us, God who protects  
as we strive to stand for justice.  
Help us  
to uphold the rights of the downtrodden  
to speak for those who are not allowed to speak  
to welcome those who are seeking refuge.

*Candle for peace [purple]*  
*Read: Isaiah 2:1-5*

We light a candle for peace.  
Illuminate us, God of light  
and show us again  
how we can live in peace.  
Teach us  
to walk together  
to listen to your wisdom  
to see in the faces of our sisters and brothers  
the spark of your image.

*Candle for replenishment and renewal [purple]*  
*Read: Isaiah 35:1-6*

We light a candle for replenishment and renewal.  
Renew us, life-giving God as a new creation

in harmony with your purposes.  
Give us  
strength when we are weak  
courage when we are afraid  
and joy when all we see are tears.

*Candle for the journey [purple]*

We light a candle for the journey.  
Come with us, companion God –  
for we dare not travel alone  
and the way ahead may be dangerous.  
We give you thanks  
for those who journey with us –  
keep us safe  
as we prepare for your coming  
and look towards a world of peace and justice.

Amen.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Colleen Geyer

<sup>2</sup> Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC) Prayer Card

<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Jonathan Inkpin

<sup>4</sup> The Rev. Jonathan Inkpin

<sup>5</sup> Fr Michael Gormly SSC (ACSJC Prayer Card)

<sup>6</sup> Australian Catholic Social Justice Council

<sup>7</sup> Theo Mackaay, in *Celebrating the New Church*, Jeni McCracken (ed), 1998  
Melbourne: Harper Collins

<sup>8</sup> Theo Mackaay

<sup>9</sup> The Rev. Elenie Poulos

<sup>10</sup> The Rev. Elenie Poulos

<sup>11</sup> Colleen Geyer