

The Cost

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 20th of June 2004.

The preacher is Rhys Besant. His sermon is entitled The Cost and is based on Jeremiah chapter 20.

Friends, what is successful ministry? You need to decide what successful ministry is because one day you will need an opinion about whom to employ in your church.

Or you will need to know what successful ministry is because you might have to decide to attend a different church if you move out of Doncaster. You have to decide where you're going to invest your money and your talents.

What kind of ministry is successful? What kind of ministry is a ministry that you ought to throw your weight behind? Well, there are lots of really confused opinions about what constitutes successful ministry.

[1 : 15] I was at a meeting of ministers not too long ago where we were talking about the pastor doing the dishes. And one of the guys who was attending looked horrified when we were having this discussion.

He said, my chief pastor would never do the dishes. He'd lose all respect in the congregation. Can you believe that? That in his mind, success meant that the pastor could not stoop to serve.

I did my first curacy at a church near here and got the gig preaching on Christmas Eve.

It was a congregation which saw lots of people from the community visit for our 11pm service on Christmas Eve. And my boss said to me, remember, to be successful tonight, Rhys, in your preaching, what you've got to do is explain, not the Christmas message, you've got to explain what people are feeling to the congregation.

His idea of a successful sermon was not me preaching the gospel or expounding the scriptures. His idea of a successful sermon was one in which I was able to help people understand their emotional state.

[2 : 45] There are those as well who regard a successful ministry as a ministry in which you can count numbers of people in the pew with lots of zeros on the end.

But what's a successful ministry? What would you give your life to? What would you give your money to? What would you give your effort, your energies to?

Would you model your ministry of success on Jeremiah? Jeremiah? Jeremiah found it tough.

His job, as we discovered last week, was to preach to the nation their imminent destruction. God would very soon bring those from the north, the enemies of the land, to destroy God's own city, the city which God had promised to be with, Jerusalem.

And while Jeremiah preached this message, all around him there were false prophets who denied it with their own story.

[3 : 56] For these false prophets weren't preaching the imminent destruction, the punishment of the city. These false prophets around Jeremiah were preaching peace, peace, peace.

You could turn a chapter forward to Jeremiah chapter 23 to see this. Jeremiah 23, 16.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, Don't listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They are deluding you.

They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They keep saying to those who despise the word of the Lord, It shall be well with you, or peace, peace. And to all who stubbornly follow their own stubborn hearts, They say, No calamity shall come upon you.

Or if you turn back to Jeremiah chapter 14. Jeremiah 14, 14.

[5 : 02] The Lord said to me, The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them.

They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, the deceit of their own minds. Therefore, thus says the Lord, concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name, though I did not send them, and who say, Sword and famine shall not come on this land.

By sword and famine, those prophets shall be consumed. And the people to whom they prophesy shall be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and sword.

There shall be no one to bury them, themselves, their wives, their sons, their daughters, for I will pour out their wickedness upon them. There were lots in Jeremiah's day who weren't prepared to preach judgment, who were trying to make life easier by preaching peace.

You don't have to worry. And this was coming from the centre of the life of the nation, even from those preaching in the temple. For we read at the end of chapter 19 of Jeremiah, just before the reading for tonight, Jeremiah 19.14, Jeremiah came from Topheth, where the Lord had sent him to prophesy, and he stood in the court of the Lord's house and said to the people, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, I am now bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their necks, refusing to hear my word.

[6 : 47] And Pashur, who was himself a preacher in the temple, preaching these wrong ideas, these wrong words, allegedly from God, is listening to Jeremiah preach.

And at the beginning of chapter 20, Pashur is becoming very agitated because Jeremiah's announcement, pronouncement, is at odds with that of the temple clergy.

So we read in 20 verse 1, When the priest Pashur, son of Emma, who was chief officer in the house of the Lord, heard Jeremiah prophesying these things, he struck the prophet Jeremiah, put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin gate of the house of the Lord.

Jeremiah is boldly preaching the downfall of the nation. He's preaching judgment against God's own people.

He's given chapters and chapters, if we've read what's between chapters 1 and 20, of pronouncements against the sin, the idolatry of the nation. And he's been seen as disloyal.

[8 : 00] He's been seen as a collaborator with those who are about to attack. He's been seen as pro-enemy, a quizzling. Jeremiah has a hard gig in bringing this difficult message to the people.

No wonder Pashur, who's leading the priests in the temple, reacts with such violence, striking him, abusing him, physically tormenting him.

And it's not that the stocks are designed merely that people would throw bad tomatoes. The stocks are configured in such a way that Jeremiah's body is at an angle, at a height, which intensifies the physical pain.

Pashur struck the prophet Jeremiah, put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin gate of the house of the Lord.

Verse 3, The next morning, when Pashur released Jeremiah from the stocks, Jeremiah said to him, what? Oh, I'm sorry, I've been wrong. I take it back. You were right after all.

[9 : 15] No, when Jeremiah speaks the next morning, having been released from the stocks, he says, the Lord has named you not Pashur, but Terror all around.

For thus says the Lord, I am making you a terror to yourself and to all your friends. They shall fall by the sword of their enemies while you look on. I will give all Judah into the hand of the king of Babylon.

He shall carry them captive to Babylon and shall kill them with the sword. I will give all the wealth of this city, all its gains, all its prized belongings, all the treasures of the kings of Judah into the hand of their enemies who shall plunder them, seize them, carry them to Babylon.

And you, Pashur, and all who live in your house shall go into captivity. To Babylon you shall go, there you shall die, there you shall be buried, you and all your friends to whom you have prophesied falsely.

Jeremiah has been released from the stocks but his message isn't moderated. He doesn't take it back. He comes out preaching as he'd preached before he went in.

[10 : 28] And with this very sharp renaming of Pashur now to be called Terror All Around for such would be Pashur's experience when the Babylonians arrived.

Jeremiah hasn't backed off. He's actually intensified his message for we learn actually the first time in the book of Jeremiah that the nation to invade will be Babylon.

This is sharpening the preaching, not backing off, going soft. Jeremiah's even more confident that the nation will soon collapse.

This is Jeremiah demonstrating a strong will, firm resolve, determined resistance, being given by God the right words to speak at the right moment, obeying his call.

Do you want to be like him? Do you dream of standing up for what you believe in? Has ever crossed your mind how you might behave were you to be put in a very difficult situation and asked to compromise as a Christian?

[11:59] Would you be prepared to speak your mind even at great physical cost? I don't know how much it hurts me to speak my mind as a Christian or has cost me to speak my mind as a Christian in classes at uni where you can be momentarily mocked as a Christian.

I've never given a speech at the Synod fearing what the repercussions might be. Should I stand up for an issue in which I believe?

I know how difficult it is to stand up and say what you think and preach it. Jeremiah is an extraordinary example of fearless resolve.

But that's not the whole story. But on the surface Jeremiah is strong. Underneath he feels particularly weak.

Like the swan on the surface of the water looks to be gliding gracefully yet underneath the surface of the water the feet are paddling away just to keep moving.

[13:27] The public Jeremiah is one thing the private Jeremiah is quite another. And in the second half of chapter 20 we see Jeremiah at home alone in bed crying in emotional pain.

He says in verse 7 Lord you've enticed me and I was enticed he feels like God's tricked him. You've overpowered me you've prevailed. I've become a laughing stock all day long.

Everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak I must cry out. I must shout violence and destruction.

That's what he's been asked to do. For the word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long he says.

But if he decides not to speak he feels caught as well we learn in verse 9 for he says if I say I will not mention him or speak any more in his name then within me there's something like a burning fire shut up in my bones I'm weary with holding it in I cannot.

When he speaks it hurts him it costs him and when he's silent it hurts him it costs him. He's trapped. He wants to speak when he speaks he gets in trouble for it.

[14:43] When he holds it in it's like a burning fire he's just got to get it out. In verse 10 there's whispers rumours surrounding Jeremiah.

I hear many whispering terror is all around using for Jeremiah the very name that he himself had used to describe Peshua. Denounce him let us denounce him all my close friends are watching for me to stumble perhaps he can be enticed we can prevail against him and take our revenge on him this is the whispers the rumours that he's hearing.

Though in verse 11 a reminder the Lord is with me like a dread warrior my persecutors will stumble they will not prevail they will be greatly shamed they will not succeed their eternal dishonour will never be forgotten O Lord of hosts you test the righteous you see the heart and the mind let me see your retribution upon them for to you I have committed my cause.

He knows that though he's weak God is a warrior who fights for his people. So momentarily in verse 13 there's this glimmer of hope sing to the Lord praise the Lord for he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evil to us.

It was a moment of reflection yes God can yet do what he said he will. Though the bleakest of all Jeremiah's laments appears in the next few sentences curse be the day on which I was born the day when my mother bore me let it not be blessed curse be the man who brought the news to my father saying a child is born to you a son making him very glad let that man be like the cities that the Lord overthrew through without pity let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon because he did not kill me in the womb so my mother would have been my grave and her womb forever great why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?

[17:05] The chapter ends with despair bleakness just as Jeremiah had been called to be a messenger bringing bad news so he reflects on what might have happened if he himself hadn't been born and the messenger who came to his father had borne bad news instead see on the outside Jeremiah's a bold preacher on the inside he's full of turmoil on the outside it looked like nothing could deflect him from obedience but on the inside he was wishing he'd never been born on the outside his ministry looked easy but at second look we see how subtle how complex how

difficult his own emotional life was have you seen the ad for Nike on TV?

I think it's Brazil playing Portugal this brilliant impressive manoeuvre I think it's by Ronaldo the soccer players amongst you can no doubt correct me afterwards it happens really quickly you think wow that looks so easy a couple of frames later in the ad we come back to the very foot manoeuvre that had so impressed us a few moments ago and see in slow motion the three or four steps that it took for an ally to execute the move and rather than now being impressed by how easy we see how difficult the sequence was to pull off at first glance looks like it's easy to do with a moment's reflection we realise there's a lot more difficulty in pulling off the manoeuvre

Shrek would no doubt have understood Jeremiah's predicament on the outside Shrek was is a green ogre strong scary on the inside Shrek is well misunderstood confused not nearly as strong as appears at first glance do you ever feel that do you ever feel the outside inside split is Jeremiah a success in ministry it was certainly very costly for him God told him he was not able to take a wife in chapter 25 we learn that he preached for 23 years without a single person turning around repenting placing their trust again in

God's promises 23 years of preaching without one conversion chapter 43 he's taken into exile and we don't even know where or when or how he died his book is full of laments there's no victorious Christian living here we ask ourselves isn't the purpose of being a believer to make us feel good no the purpose of being a believer is not to make us feel good but that we might be good and sometimes it's through pain and suffering that God accomplishes this work Jeremiah was a success Jeremiah is a success Jeremiah models for us successful ministry why because in Jeremiah we see strength with sensitivity we see both a hard head and a soft heart

Jeremiah is a model for us of being hard headed and soft hearted at the same time he's not merely hard headed knows what to say knows what to preach knows the right answers he's not merely soft hearted emotionally sensitive compassionate or generous in spirit he is both hard headed and soft hearted at the same time that is the kind of person I want to be in ministry that's the kind of person I'll follow which end of the spectrum do you gravitate towards are you more at the hard headed end or more at the soft hearted end there's nothing wrong with being at the hard headed end but please may I encourage you to practice being soft hearted learning compassion praying for gentleness exercising a ministry of listening not just telling people what the answer is but letting them express and work through verbally themselves what they're thinking and feeling but if you're in the soft hearted end perhaps it's time that you prayed that

[22 : 58] God would make you bold to speak of the truth of Jesus Christ perhaps if you're at the soft hearted end you ought to ask God to help you not be resentful of those who are evangelists but make you more of an evangelist yourself cultivating not just your inner life but your public confidence as well I actually think that the most successful ministries are those in which being hard headed and soft hearted are held together and not because this is a particular insight of my own but because the apostle Paul in 2nd Corinthians 12 tells us that God's grace is sufficient for us because his power is made perfect in our weakness his power is made perfect in our weakness acknowledging our weakness gives

God room to change us God's glory is enhanced when we allow him to work on the inside in our weakness to empower embolden our public outside witness to Christ a really remarkable thing happened to me about 1984 I was living in Queen's College at the university and had quite a few non-Christian friends that's not the remarkable thing what was remarkable was that I had a really awful year and had to see a counsellor and had to decide whether I told my closest friends that I was seeing the counsellor and particularly my non-Christian friends I decided I would with 2 Corinthians 12 ringing loud in my head and though I was really depressed though I was finding life really difficult this is what one of my non-Christian friends said to me

Rhys you feel really lousy but you've given me a window to see God at work in your life I remember vividly the conversation when John gave me these words you've given me a window to see God at work in your life and John became a Christian and is now the vicar of Pauline God's power is made perfect in our weakness the most successful ministries are those ministries which resemble Jeremiah yes and remember and resemble the Lord Jesus as well for though Jesus himself could preach judgment and say woe to you scribes and Pharisees woe to you scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 at the end of

Matthew 23 he says oh Jerusalem how I've longed to gather you together under my wings like a bird gathers her chicks for in Jesus ministry we see both strength and sensitivity awareness of

weakness and awareness of God's mighty power for Jesus was not unsuccessful merely because his disciples fled because he was arrested because the nation refused to turn around he wasn't unsuccessful though people might think that because he was physically humiliated or emotionally mocked spiritually tested publicly scorned and cried out why God have you forsaken me Jesus was successful because in dying and rising he demonstrated meekness and majesty

God's power being made perfect in weakness Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Protestant pastor who stood up to Hitler boldly and was involved in a plot to have Hitler assassinated there's been recent documentaries on TV and at the movies describing something of Bonhoeffer's life and experience but though on the outside this looked like the bravest move to stand up to Hitler and plot with a few others against the Nazi machinery he on the inside felt very weak confused and wrote this poem who am I they tell me often that I step out of my cell relaxed and happy and firm as a lord strives out of his manor house who am

[28 : 09] I they tell me often that I speak with my jailers freely and friendly and clearly as if I had something to offer them who am I they say to me often that I carry the day of disaster with even temper smiling and proud as one for whom success is expected am I really what others say of me or am I what I see myself to be unsettled longing sick like a bird in a cage struggling for air to live as if someone were strangling me hungering for colours flowers bird calls thirsting for good words for human intimacy raging with anger over capriciousness and the littlest of things pushed around by waiting for big things fainting and worried for distant friends tired and empty to pray to think to create despairing and ready to leave this world who am I the one or the other am I one today and a different one tomorrow am I both at once a hypocrite before men and inwardly a despicably suffering weakling or am I like the defeated army which collapses into chaos because the victory is so near who am

I this solitary question drives me remorselessly whoever I am you know me yours I am my Lord and my God who do people say that the son of man is some say John the Baptist others Elijah still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets Jesus asks who do you say that I am Peter replied you are the Messiah the son of the living God let me pray oh gracious

Lord we are so overwhelmed by the inside outside split in our lives appearing one thing confidently boldly to some and yet in our heart of hearts in our quiet moments despairing being sad feeling like no one can hear how we pray that your strength would be made perfect in our weakness thank you that you do this for us every day bringing forth in our lives all the fruit of the gospel and using us weak as we are to further your own good purposes in the world how we praise you Lord Jesus that you like Jeremiah suffered you like

Jeremiah in the end were vindicated were raised and even now sit at the right hand of the father we praise you Lord Jesus for you are the Messiah the suffering servant the son of the living God Amen