

Address by Archbishop Freier

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Preacher: Archbishop Freier

[0 : 0 0] Lips and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Well, what wonderful words we heard in the Gospel of the compassion and the love of our Lord for people whom he knew would reject him.

That very compressed but poignant and powerful image of Jesus speaking there and saying how when he looks over Jerusalem, how it is in his heart, he would so much seek to gather up its people into the embrace of his love, but yet he knows that won't happen.

He knows that he'll be rejected. And I guess it's hard for us to put ourselves in Jesus' place in that way because, I mean, our love is, it's not as great as the love of Jesus, obviously.

We seek towards that love, but often our love is much less. We experience perhaps a glimpse of it sometimes, but then we're often quickly pulled back into things that seem to justify our hard-heartedness.

So I think that reading we had from Luke's Gospel is a wonderfully powerful one that we do well to reflect on and to seek in our prayers to ask God to show us just how we can apprehend, just in those few words, the great scope of Jesus' love and compassion, not just for Jerusalem, not just that place that he physically was there in its midst and wanted to embrace, but for us all.

[1 : 5 1] And I think if we can get something of a grasp of that, we really have a beginning of what God is planning for us to do and to understand through the Incarnation, through the sending of the Son.

We're called to understand how great is God's love and how that claim of God over us is so complete. Yet we're people who are like the people of Jerusalem, people who need to choose in the freedom of the liberty that God grants to us to be obedient to God or not.

And of course, in the big decisions of life, I can probably say with great confidence that people here are ones who have, in the words of our baptism service, turned to Christ.

Do you turn to Christ? Do you repent of your sins? You've turned to Christ, you've repented of your sins. But you know, in the big decisions of life, we've done that. But you know, in a lot of the daily decisions of life, I think we find again and again, we're at a bit of a crossroads.

How do we decide? What do we do? How will we really live as a disciple? By whose principles will we conform ourselves? And that's why I think that some of the words in Scripture that deal with how we are in our relationship with God and how we are in our relationship with the world are very important for us to reflect on.

[3 : 1 9] Because we know that we are, irrespective of who we are in Christ, we're not strangers any longer. Ephesians 2.19, that wonderful word to the Gentiles, that they're no longer strangers and aliens to God.

They're people who have been brought right into the middle through baptism, into that living stream, which is the great story of God calling a people to himself.

So we know that we're not strangers and aliens and people who are outside of something as far as God's concerned. But we also know, as we hear 1 Peter 2.11, how we are called to live as strangers and exiles in the world.

And an interesting kind of mix of the same ideas, but that their application is very different. I mean, one idea that we're no longer strangers and aliens or exiles from God in Christ, but that we are, because of being called to Christ, we are in some sort of a relationship that is no longer like the natural relationship we once had with the world and the things that are familiar around us.

And you saw some of those things earlier, I spoke about culture. We know that God just doesn't call us all to be Westerners or he doesn't call us all to be Palestinian or he doesn't just call us all to be whatever is the dominant sort of group who happen to have received the gospel.

[4 : 59] We know that the gospel is properly something that finds its expression in the life of people as they live it. And we could travel around the world and see those different and authentic expressions of the gospel, finding its root in people with different languages and different cultures and different ways of looking at a whole lot of things that might be so different from us.

So we know that. But we also know that there is something about how it is that we're always, as Christians, you know, a bit removed from those things. And I guess that you find that these are some of the decisions we're making in our daily life.

You know, we're finding that. How do we use our money? What do we really need? You know, how we make decisions about a whole lot of things.

You know, if we are, as many as are in our families, we're guiding the attitudes and the upbringing of young people, how they're formed and shaped. What sort of things do we seek to guide and shape them in?

Because we know that we're in a world where there is much pressure on us from every different expectation. Just look as you drive around and see how many billboards there are screaming out to you with big and compelling images.

[6 : 16] How many, you know, turn the radio and there's someone trying to sell you something. Even if you're listening to ABC, they're trying to sell you on listening to one of their programs. You know, you turn on the television, you get this, you know, bombardment of things that you are meant to show a loyalty and allegiance to.

I'll tell you what, coming to Melbourne, I'll tell you what, there's no neutrality in this football game. Wow. People seem horribly disturbed if, you know, as I have, I haven't declared my allegiance, you know, to the mighty cats or to the fighting hawks or the, wherever they are, you know.

And for some people, it's a matter of genuine and grave concern. You know, that I'm somehow showing that I'm not properly embracing this culture because, you know, I'm a little bit of a remove from that.

You see, we all, it doesn't matter who we are, and it's not because we, yeah, this looks like an Essendon, colours, I know. Yeah. But it's not, it's not because, it's not because we're kind of deluded people.

It's just because the world that we live in is, is wonderfully attractive to us. It's a wonderful world, but it can be a more wonderful world when we get it in its right order.

[7 : 31] And I think that's what Christian discipleship's about and what I really want to focus on today about being a disciple, because this, this 40 days, this time we call Lent, as we make a journey to Easter is a, a wonderful time to reflect on what our discipleship is like.

You know, have we really got things in their right order? Are we really living as creatures who know our creator, or are we trying to live as little creators who think that everything revolves around us?

Well, I think that's really the message of our modern world. Live as a little creator. Live as if you will not die. Everything that you deserve should be yours. You know, you just, some of them even, the ads use that kind of language.

Ads for credit cards. Don't worry, you know, you can get what you deserve, what you should have. Go and have it. You deserve it. Help yourself. Well, they sound more like the words of Satan testing our Lord in the desert than they do about the words of our Lord encouraging us to follow him.

So from that basis, I'm pretty sure that most of you, even having made the big decisions to follow Christ, are probably faced a lot of daily discipleship questions of what your following of Christ will look like.

[8 : 52] And so some of that language of exile, which is picked up in the reading from the prophet Jeremiah, is to me very valuable for us to reflect on.

I think Jeremiah must be one of the most perplexing prophets in the Old Testament, because Jeremiah is someone who is absolutely specific. He's not just giving his own commentary.

He's not just saying, hey, this is a, had a few ideas and I reckon this is pretty fair. Give this a go. Jeremiah is very specific. You know, he's, he's reluctant to be a prophet of the Lord. He's actually specific.

When it is, he says, the word of the Lord came to him. It is in his own subjective experience as if something that was before external comes to him in his subjective self-telling of that story.

He speaks of encountering the Lord and the Lord saying to him, I have put my words in your mouth, the Lord touching him and saying, I have put my words in your mouth. So, um, Jeremiah isn't just some sort of, um, you know, uh, a commentator on the radio or, or someone who's saying, look, I've given us a bit of a thought and I've looked at the signs of what's around the world.

[10 : 02] And I reckon it could be this way. Jeremiah is speaking with a great confidence. And I think that must've been perplexing for people because Jeremiah is in a way prophesying them into exile.

And then in the part we heard today, speaking to the exiles and he's telling them some very strange things, things which were, are almost, um, you know, at total and diametrical loggerheads with, I, I think how they'd feel.

And so what's he say? He says many things, but he says, you know, these are, these are the, the people he's speaking to, the elders among the exiles, the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Now, these are people who are humiliated people. They've been some of the, the senior people because it's a kind of a strange paradox in the ancient world.

You know, some of the leadership, they go to eradicate those. And sometimes they eradicate a whole line of, of, of dissent entirely, but they, they always sort of regard the nobility and the dignity of, of people who are important to some extent too.

[11 : 14] So if you're, if you're sort of plundering and pillaging a country, you seek to eradicate those, some of those people, but you also seek to keep some because I suppose you realize they will be the people who will, uh, give order and organization amongst the subjugated people.

A bit like, you know, in the prisoner of war camp, they quickly get the officers to, to manage the kind of situation of the enlisted people and because they need to have a, a structure and a, and an order in things, even an exile.

So these are the people, these are people who've been humiliated. They've been driven from any concept of their own value into this, this, you know, valueless thing as an exile.

And if you think that we sometimes treat refugees badly, go and have a look at how some of these people in these ancient times are treated. It's meant to be humiliating. It's meant to, meant to daily remind them that they are a subjugated people, that there is no thing that they should expect that will from this time be good about their life.

So what's Jeremiah tell them? Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, verse seven, and pray to the Lord on its behalf for its welfare.

[12 : 40] You will find your welfare. Could you imagine being people like the ones who heard those words, given what they had experienced? You know, maybe if you were someone like that, well, your natural impulse would be to try and, you know, seek something for yourself.

You might try and make a life for yourself and your family. We've seen that in Australia. How many generations of new immigrants have come to Australia often after difficult circumstances this is almost of exile or expulsion?

And their efforts are so given to making their life secure. Their efforts are so given to trying to provide some sort of a safeguard that it won't happen again.

And I know of people, you know, who have bank accounts in Argentina. They've got them in other places. Because if it ever happens again, at least they believe there's a place they might retreat to.

And so the humiliation and the exile that they've experienced, perhaps in their family's history, won't be their fate once more. I mean, that's natural. That's what our human reason will tell us.

[13 : 48] You've had a bad thing happen. Do what you can do to make things as bearable as you can for yourself. But what's Jeremiah say in his word from the Lord? Seek the welfare of the city where I'm sending you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf.

For in its welfare, you will find your welfare. That just means to me an amazing thing. I don't know how those people receive that. whether they really, really took it to be a word from the Lord.

Whether it changed them in the way that I think it would have changed them where they have taken it seriously. But that was the Lord's message for them. So I think for us, there's something in this about how we live in our world.

I think in the last hundred years, the Western world, of which we're part, has changed incredibly. I went to Westminster Abbey a couple of years back.

And there's some high Victorian decorations in it. In the high altar, about the 1880s, 1890s, at probably the pinnacle of British dominance of the world, there was this decoration added behind the high altar in a restyling of things that happens.

[15 : 07] And these words from scripture written above the high altar. However, the kingdoms of the world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. Because then, a hundred years ago, it was possible to imagine that with a Christian monarch on the throne of what was then the greatest country in the world, there would be, as it were, the kingdoms of the world submitting themselves to the rule of Christ.

And there was great optimism in that high Victorian era of the good that would follow, the spread of Christendom.

That there would be, through the bowing down of the rulers and leaders of these different nations, a wonderful spread of Christianity. Now, of course, we know that we don't live in a world that even is vaguely like that anymore.

We don't live in a world where those kinds of ideas are even entertained. Sometimes we pop out a bit and we talk about Australia being a Christian nation. And I'm happy to talk about the Christian influences that are part of makes us who we are.

But, you know, we know at the bottom line we're not really a Christian nation in terms of what people in their heart believe. We're not by any principle other than the agreement of the people ruled by things that vaguely reflect Christianity.

[16 : 36] And so often we find that the world that we live in, the world that we live here in little old Australia, not a big part, it's not probably leading the world or anything, but, you know, it's so changed from some of the assumptions that even a couple of generations ago could have been made.

And I think more and more we are living with something of the experience and can value from something of this teaching of what it's like to live closely with the Lord, knowing that we're not strangers or exiles from God, but knowing what it's like, as we're told, to live in such a way that we are strangers and pilgrims on this earth.

Now, differently to what some people think, because some people take that line and you get all sorts of escapist ideas in Christianity, people who think, well, this world is nothing, it doesn't matter, you know, it's irrelevant, the sooner it passes, the better.

You've probably heard some of those ideas, you've probably read some of those kind of books if you've read things like that, you know, but I think Jeremiah is talking about something entirely different.

He's talking about living, knowing God, but living in such a way and showing such a concern for the world we live in, even a world which might humiliate us, even a world which is the source of our oppression, even a world which is the source of our disadvantage, being so concerned for it that we are wanting its welfare.

[18 : 06] Funny word, I think we've distorted that word because we think it means the bits left over now. You know, if you're on welfare, you're getting that kind of a bit left over that's not really a good bit.

It's not really the best bit. It's not really as good as the people who've got a job. If you're on unemployment benefits or from a sickness benefit, you're getting a bit, you're not getting much. But what it really means is the abundance of life, the welfare, knowing God and knowing God's blessings.

And so I think in a way we've distorted that word welfare. It means going well in the journey. If you turn around, it becomes farewell. Farewell means go well on your journey.

Travel well. Travel knowing God's blessings. And so welfare is that as well. It's knowing an abundance. So Jeremiah is telling the exiles to seek that welfare of the city.

Seek its abundance of goodness that comes from God. And that they should not just seek it, but they should pray to the Lord on its behalf.

[19 : 16] Because God knows that that city is a city that doesn't really know him. If there are to be people who are to pray, it'll be God's people as intercessors.

They'll be the people who will pray on its behalf. For in its welfare, you will find your welfare. I think these to me are wonderful words and very challenging words for us.

Because I think as churches, where we stand in the Western world, where we stand in Australia, we have much uncertainty about where we are. There's much uncertainty.

Much uncertainty about our place. You know, we often yearn for a place of respect and value. And we feel that's the way it should be. But we know that amongst the communities where we live, we are probably a tiny minority.

Even a church as wonderfully filled as this, what percentage of the people of the suburbs here do we represent? You know, probably a tiny group, isn't it, in a way. How many of our neighbours do we know for whom the things of God are not matters that they're concerned about?

[20 : 23] You know, they're more worried about the Formula One race, or they're worried about their beach house, or they're worried about their superannuation. They're worried about the things of the world. And often we're worried about those things too.

And in this time, as we reflect on our discipleship, I think we need to look more and more at this focus that God calls us to have. And it's a focus which, to me, speaks of the importance for us to really seek well for the people amongst whom we live.

I suppose it's a bit of an application of what Jesus is saying about pray for those who persecute you. Even pray for those who give you trouble. I mean, it's that kind of stuff, isn't it?

It's about us being so vitally concerned for the abundance of life for those around us, that we pray for them. We pray for people to have an abundant life.

An abundant life knowing God. An abundant life using the good things of the world in the way that God, who is the source of them, wants them to be lived and shared.

[21 : 30] And, of course, that comes back very much to us, how we deal with those things. Because, you know, I think, as I used to say to people in the Northern Territory, you know, even if we're only 30 or 40 Sunday attenders, we've got such wealth, even those 30 or 40 people, there's no reason you can't support a full-time ministry.

And there was wonderful and generous giving to do that. But you think often, you know, just in our Christian giving, we're still very measured often. We're not really in our churches experiencing the joy and the generosity of using the good things God gives us in the way they should be used.

People say, oh, it's so sad we've only got, we've gone from 30,000 Anglicans in Melbourne to 20,000 on a Sunday. I don't know what the numbers are. But, hey, 20,000 sounds like a lot of people to me. And if that 20,000 people are living an abundant life in the Lord, I mean, how transforming is that?

I don't know how many there were of these exiles, but there probably weren't many. But, you know, God's giving them the responsibility of praying and seeking the welfare of that great city Babylon.

What a responsibility we have. And so it's an understanding things in a couple of ways.

[22 : 49] It's understanding that the world is good, but it's not God. God is God who has made the world.

The good things of this world are great, but they're not God. And they find their true value as we find our true value in God, as God has revealed himself to us in Christ.

So it seems to me there is much that, as I go around Melbourne, as some of you know I have been talking to people, there is much that people are seeking. And the stories that are, this is there wanting to be told.

There are so many unheard stories amongst the people we live with. I met a man down at Fountain Gate, and I said to him, you know, he's been up sitting in the coffee shop there, just sort of went up and said, oh, g'day, you know how I am, blah, blah, who I am.

I said, do you come here often? He said, look, I come here three or four times a week, every time I'm lonely. I said, oh, how's that? He said, oh, my wife died 18 months ago, my daughters don't live near me.

[23 : 59] Sometimes I feel so lonely. I come down here, and I go to Donut King, and I can get a pensioner's special, a cup of coffee and a donut for \$2.20, and I just come here, and I sit in the hope I can talk to someone.

You know, I didn't have to do too much, just go and ask this guy a few questions. Be open to his story. But the number of places I've been, just people I've been talking to, the stories are there. There is a world of incredible need out there, who are seeking some of the abundance of life of God.

So as we are people who seek the welfare of others, not just the, you know, the bit that we don't want, but the real welfare, people to be well in God and in life, I think there's much that we can engage and speak to the world around us.

And you just read Jeremiah, you know, what God's saying here. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream.

For it is a lie that are prophesying to you in my name. I did not send them, says the Lord. How many false guides are there running around in our world today? I mean, I'm just amazed.

[25 : 14] You go and see all these shops, and they've got all these books and crystals and dragons, and every suburban shopping center you go into. People looking for guidance in these kinds of things.

There's many false guides, because there is much need. And I think if God has an indictment upon us as a church, is that we're not really learning the message, which is a message well evident to us here in Scripture, of what it's like to live in the world of the kind that we live in.

Live in a world where we can truly live as strangers and exiles, as pilgrims in a world, but to be people who are so concerned for the world around us that we engage in that world.

We don't just sort of pull apart into something which is, you know, a little kind of survival strategy, but we talk about, not survival, but thriving.

What it is that God desires for his people. And I, just in the encounters I've had, and here walking around Melbourne, the people who are so eager for that message of good news.

[26 : 20] Just the other day, I went to, see I'm going to all these shops, muffin break. Went to muffin break at, because they sell gluten-free muffins I found there, and I've just discovered the last year of my celiac, so I'm out looking for all this sort of weird stuff.

So, went to muffin break, and there was a woman there I spoke to, she's an Indian woman. I said, oh yeah, I just said to her, I said, you speak, you speak with such beautiful clear diction. She had a lovely speech.

And she said to me, oh well that's, I hate to say it, but that's kind of a result of the Raj. Which is an interesting thing to say. I said, oh well you know, where do you come from? Oh I come from similar, the old winter capital of India, but I've lived in Delhi, and how long have you been in Australia?

I've been here three years. You know, she was talking about what her face, she said, oh really I'm a Hindu, but I think I live more like a Buddhist, but my children go to Catholic school. She said, but you know what? She said, I'm very open, I'm very open to understanding the truth.

This is the world that we're in. And if we're in a world where we engage with people, and we're living the reality of that truth, I think we can be people who are not just celebrating a blessing of God for us, but we can be people who truly are, as Jeremiah tells those humiliated exiles, to be people who, in the welfare of the community in which they are found, will find our welfare.

[27 : 44] For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

I am just, you know, amazed sometimes what people say, but I had all these kind of funny, when I was elected Archbishop of Melbourne, I had all these sort of funny messages from people, and some of them would sort of say, oh we don't know whether we should say congratulations or commiserations, and I thought, hey this is really, this is really crazy, and a few people started saying this, and I said, well look, you know, it's not as if I've just been elected the president of the Hells Angels, or the Gypsy Jokers or something, you know, this is a Christian church, this is the church of Jesus Christ, and what a privilege it is, for me to serve in a role with those people.

And I think we get into some bad space sometimes, you know, we get into some stuff which is really the thinking of the world, not the thinking of God, because how does God look at us? Does God look at us with love and delight?

I'm sure he does. When we gather here today, someone said to me, someone down the back said, if you get me singing, you'll empty this church, get my husband up the front singing, but don't give me up the church, you'll empty this church, he said, well great, we'll get you for the last hymn.

We want to move you on. But, but you know, even if we, even if we, you know, our words don't come out as well as others, God delights that we gather in worship.

[29 : 18] Jesus promises to be with us. He sends the spirit to be with us. I mean, we, we should be people who are, are so glad about that, and not weak people, but people who in the power of God's spirit, can be living in our world as ones who intercede for the people of that world, intercede for the city in which we are found, who seek its welfare, who really are concerned for its good.

Its good, which is primarily in finding a right relationship with its creator, understanding all that Jesus came to tell us about God, and the way to a new relationship with the father, but in so many other ways.

So I, I pray that I, if I knew more about your ministry, I'd probably be able to tell you the things you're doing in this way. I don't know, but I, I just know in the churches I've been to, you know, you get bits and glimpses, especially afterwards, people tell you about things.

And I think, well, what a wonderful witness. What a wonderful thing in these, in along this line of what Jeremiah is saying that we're doing. We should be glad about that. We should rejoice in that.

We should rejoice that there's 220 other parishes. And the ones I've found all in their own way are faithfully trying to do what you're doing here. It was wonderful to go.

[30 : 39] First parish we went to was Footscray and, uh, people, so many Sudanese people. And there were some people came from different congregations. I, uh, I said, uh, you know, maybe some people would like to come forward for prayer and laying on our hands after the communion.

Hour and a half after that, we were still finishing praying for people, people who had such, you know, the experience of torture and trauma that they'd been through in Southern Sudan, such needs they wanted to bring before the Lord.

And what, what wonderful ministry is it? Okay. We mightn't have that ministry here, but isn't that a great blessing that we can rejoice that brothers and sisters who are with us in this diocese of Melbourne are part of that ministry.

And, and things that, that you, you will tell me about your ministry here, that I will be glad to encourage others to rejoice with you in. For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

Well, I, I hope you'll keep praying for me. I'm glad you pray for me. I think this is a, this is a important spiritual responsibility. I mean, there's all sorts of clever things I can do and organizational things I can do.

[31 : 54] But I think the most important thing I can do is to walk as closely with God as I'm able. And so I pray that you will keep, I hope that you'll keep praying for me in that way. And that those words in Jeremiah 29, 11 are ones that more and more we as Anglicans here in this diocese of Melbourne can embrace as ours with gladness that God has a good plan for us, for our good, and that we can have a future with hope.

Because unless we have that, we're probably on the wrong ship. We've missed, we've missed the boat. We're, we're, we're not where, we're not where Jesus is and wants us to be. So friends, it's a great pleasure of me to be with you here today and, and wonderful to join with you in your worship and to, to celebrate with you.

And now in the second, we're going to have three opportunities or three congregations to, to be part of that. And it's a, it's a wonderful thing to see all that you have been continuing faithful to the Lord in your witness in this place.

So to God, be all honour and glory and power in the world and in the church this day and evermore. Amen.