

The Challenge of Two Delusions

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Preacher: Rev. James Maciver

[0 : 00] Let's turn tonight for a short time to the prophecy of Jeremiah, the prophecy of Jeremiah and words you'll find in chapter 9, and we can read from verse 23.

Thus says the Lord, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh, Egypt, Judah, Adam, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert and who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.

So, the referendum is over. It's a word I'm sure many of us don't really want to hear for a long time. There was a lot of debate, a lot of discussion, a lot of issues raised, which were of course important to raise and to deliberate upon and to discuss, and to have people as a whole, as a people, as a nation involved in the discussion of them.

But the outcome of that referendum is clear. We are still part of the UK by a majority of the citizens of Scotland.

[1 : 45] That's a decision we respect. We believe in democracy. We believe that the majority, in circumstances like these, carry the day, and that we should bow especially before God and say, this is how God chose to have it.

This is his will. This is his purpose. This is how he ordained it. But what now? That's the big question. And our concern tonight is not simply what is the future politically, economically, in other aspects of the life of the nation, what does that future hold?

It's important to us all. But it's not simply the only thing we want to contemplate. How the nation develops is very much tied in with, as we believe things and as we see things, as a people of God, as the Church of God, as part of the Church of God in the nation, the nation's development cannot leave behind the contribution of the Church, the contribution of the Gospel.

And what we ourselves want to have, in terms of playing our part, as a denomination, as congregations, as individual Christians, in the development of the nation.

What are our priorities? How must we respond to the situation that now faces us? What are we going to emphasize?

[3 : 16] What challenges do we face? How do we face them? How do we face up to them? How do we face up to them? How do we face up to them? Well, here's a post-referendum message from God.

Our concern tonight, and our concern always in preaching the Gospel, is not to do with any particular political persuasion, any particular political aspirations, any party policies.

Our concern is to know the truth of God, and how that must fit into the life of the nation, and how the Church of God, that we are part of, must make it their business, as God has given them a mandate, to hold that truth of the nation, that truth of God before the nation, including whichever government is in place at any time.

Well, Jeremiah sets out a few markers for us in this passage. And as we look at these markers, we'll see that Jeremiah is really setting out a response to what he sees as two delusions.

Two stances in the nation of his day that many people took, but were simply delusions. One was, you might say, a secular delusion, and one was a religious delusion.

[4 : 42] What we want to do is try and see how that fits into the things that we face now in our nation, the challenge to us being true to Jesus Christ in our nation as a Church and as Christians, and how we face up to these two delusions in the modern version of them, because they are absolutely still with us, and they are very much part of the framework of thinking that you face when you meet people, and indeed it seems the majority of people as they make up the people of Scotland.

Here, first of all, is what we can see is a secular delusion. Now, I'm using the word secular in the dictionary definition of it. Secular in that sense of it really means non-religious.

And if you look at the declarations of a body such as the National Secular Society, you'll find that what they are about is not simply atheism out and out, not necessarily the case that every secularist is an atheist, though many atheists, if not all atheists, are secularists.

A secularist is somebody who wants to detach religion from other aspects of life as we see human life individually, or especially public life.

A secularist is committed to taking anything to do with religion, not just the Christian religion, though that is the main target, anything to do with religion has to be taken out of public life altogether.

[6 : 24] That's what the secularist agenda is. That's what a secularist is driven by. That's what those committed to secularism are really about. And Jeremiah gives us in these markers certain things that are applicable to looking at the challenges that face us in the secularism of our own day.

Because he's dealing here with, first of all, a threefold basis for self-confidence. And then he deals with a threefold basis for secure confidence.

In other words, there is a secular delusion where these three things that he mentions as not to boast in are the very things that you'll find human beings boasting in when they cut God out of their lives.

wisdom, power, riches. What Jeremiah is saying, whoever boasts, let not the wise man boast in his wisdom.

Let not the mighty man boast in his might. Let not the rich man boast in his riches. If you are, he says, to have boasting, let it be the boasting that knows and understands the Lord, that he is the Lord, and that he does steadfast love and justice and righteousness, that he loves and takes delight in these.

[7 : 51] In other words, Jeremiah is saying, there's such a thing as boasting. And boasting effectively means putting your confidence in something, trusting in something, having a kind of, having an attitude to things that make you feel secure in them and that you are confident in them.

And what he's saying is the secularist view is a delusion because it's really self-confidence. It's really no more than the confidence that's based on human ability itself.

But the boasting that is real and lasting and proper and properly founded boasting, the confidence that he draws us to instead of the self-confidence of the secularist, the confidence that he draws our minds to is confidence in the Lord.

Confidence in the being of God. Confidence in who God is and confidence in what God does in steadfast love and in justice and in righteousness in the earth.

So you see, that's the framework that Jeremiah gives us and if we look at it as a post-referendum study or message, as God, if you like, has sent us this message because it's arising out of his word, this is where our mind is being directed to and our mind directed by.

[9 : 15] The difference, the way in which Jeremiah separates what the boasting of the secular mind is about and what the boasting of the Christian is to be about as they put confidence in God.

Look first of all at this boasting of the rich man and of the wise man and of the powerful man. There are three things, there's threefold basis of self-confidence.

It begins with wisdom. Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. By the wise man, he means the wise man who doesn't really look to God for his wisdom.

He means the process of human thought divorced from God's truth. He means human reasoning in itself and its application to human life. Let not the wise man, the person who is really wise in human terms, in human philosophies, in human reasonings, let not the person who is wise in that regard, let him not boast in that wisdom.

Let him not feel secure in that wisdom. Let not that wisdom be given or be set out as the basis upon which any human society can safely build.

[10 : 32] And the passage read in the New Testament fit in very closely with the reasoning of Jeremiah, with the teaching of Jeremiah in this passage. You remember Paul in 1 Corinthians?

What's he dealing with in 1 Corinthians? He is dealing with the difference, with a gulf between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of human beings.

The wisdom that's set out in the Gospel, which is the preaching of Christ crucified, and the wisdom that's set out in human thinking that despises that and sees that as completely insufficient, completely irrelevant, completely at odds with what really the world needs.

That's the secularist way of looking at it. Or the religion that looks at it in a way other than the Christian religion does. Let's just combine it to the secularism that we face in our age. Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. This was what Paul came across in Corinth. These Corinthians were famed as Greeks for their wisdom, for their philosophical prowess, for the way that they were able to argue in terms of Greek philosophy the wisdom that saw the world in a particular light and really despised such a thing as a crucified Jew as if that was in any way relevant to the needs of the world.

[11 : 59] You see the way Paul is arguing in that context. The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are saved it is the power of God.

Where is the one who is wise? God, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom. It pleased God through the foolishness of what we preach to save those who believe. The Jews demand signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

The Corinthians boasted in their own ability to philosophize. They boasted in the superiority of their human reasoning above things like this gospel that Paul was preaching in their midst.

They saw themselves as absolutely superior and too above other people because of the prowess they had in their philosophy and in their wisdom.

[13 : 04] And Paul is dismantling that thinking. He is dismantling it because he is saying that is actually foolishness in comparison to the wisdom of God which human reasoning sees as foolishness.

And you see how he finished off that part of that passage when we finished as he spoke about himself as he came to Corinth and as his message was received and blessed to people to form a church in Corinth as God formed it.

What did he say? My speaking my message were not in plausible words of wisdom. It wasn't in the wisdom of human beings. It wasn't something manufactured by human ability.

It wasn't simply that Paul came as a great orator with persuading words. He says himself that he wasn't a great orator that his speech was nothing to be admired in itself.

No he says I came to you in demonstration of the spirit of God and in power. Why? Why is he concerned to emphasize that?

[14 : 14] So that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. That's the contrast he's drawing between what our faith must rest in and what everything else would want to have in place of it.

That is the wisdom the power of God not the wisdom of men. And whenever you find the wisdom of men exalted above the power and wisdom of God you've got problems.

You've got a society that's running in the wrong direction. You've got a society that's bound to face all kinds of problems moral and spiritual problems other problems as well because the direction is taking them away from the wisdom of God.

Let not says Jeremiah the wise man boast in his wisdom. Let not our nation let not our leaders think that the wisdom of men is to be the ground in which our society is to develop.

You have to keep before these people you have to keep before the world around you you have to keep saying to those in authority that human philosophy will not do of itself that God has given us an alternative a superior alternative and that that is in the gospel.

[15 : 42] Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom and let not the mighty man boast in his might and his power. Power can be a number of things or a combination of things even.

You can think of power or strength in physical terms. You can think of power in terms of mental strength.

You can think of power in terms of status. Status the position that people have or are given or manage to get for themselves in any society.

That gives power. That gives a position. And you can think of power in terms of financial power. Somebody put it there is such a thing in the Bible of course as the golden rule.

But somebody was diverting that and just using the phrase and asking do you know what the golden rule is? Well I'll tell you those who have the gold make the rules.

[16 : 51] Money gives power. Money gives. That kind of worldly success that brings with it especially along with these other things where you've got status, where you've got financial clout, where you've got position in any society.

You've got influence. And what God is saying is let not the mighty man boast in his might. Let not those who have such places of position or influence whether it be through status or finance or money, whatever, let them not boast in that power.

You see. It appears that that's really in a sense what Paul was facing in Corinth as well. People who boasted not just in their wisdom and their philosophy but also as you find in every society the great gulf between the rich and the poor, between the haves and the have nots.

That gap is obvious in our own day. What do we do about it? How do we approach it? Well not with human resources only, not with the ideas that people have without God of what makes people powerful, of what is a properly founded state.

God is saying to us be aware of that. That's going to lead you into more trouble. That's going to widen the gap between the haves and the have nots. What he's saying is, let not the mighty man boast in his might.

[18:25] Let it be instead the might of the Lord. You see, that's how Paul argues again in the Corinthians, in his second letter to the Corinthians. You remember his second letter to the Corinthians, how he spoke about being given a thorn in the flesh to keep him in check, to keep him in place.

This thorn was given me, a messenger of Satan. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you.

My power is made perfect in weakness. See, that's what Paul learned through that, that he gives over his own strength to the Lord and really says, actually Lord, as far as the things that really matter are concerned, I am weak and I need your strength to make me strong.

That's true of every nation as well. How did Paul then go on? He says, listen to what he's saying, and how close it is to the language of Jeremiah, therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

For the sake of Christ then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for when I am weak, then I am strong. What is he saying?

[19:48] If I'm going to boast, I'm not going to boast in my own strength. I'm not going to boast in human influence, in human power. I'm going to boast in the strength of Christ in me.

I shall boast in saying and confessing that I am absolutely weak. And we have to try and convey that to a world that's so obsessed with human power, with human ability, with human influence, as well as human wisdom.

It's a powerful combination. Human wisdom, human reasoning, human power, human influencing, human influences, all detached from God, all separated off from anything to do with putting your trust in God.

That's what we're facing. And that's the direction that many political agendas will actually take us in. Because God does not come into the reckoning.

And dealing with things in faith in God does not even mention as far as the advance of any nation is concerned, as far as we see in our own nation. And then there's riches.

[21:01] Let not the rich man boast in his riches. riches. How often did the economy feature in discussions prior to the referendum?

How much will it feature in discussions post-referendum in the days to come? A huge amount. I'm not saying it's wrong of course to have the economy and financial matters which affect us all from day to day spoken about and discussed.

They are important issues. But what God is saying to us is let not the rich man boast in his riches.

Let us not look at our future as a nation as to where we come in the league table of nations as far as our prosperity financially is concerned.

Let's not look at a united kingdom that looks back over history and gloats as sometimes we find still some people gloating in the fact that we really were the people who had the great empire and who built things in other countries and who brought such benefits to other countries.

We did but that's gone. And as we look to the future it's not looking back and glowing with pride that we have to do it. It's bringing our weakness to God.

[22:26] It's bringing our financial security to God for him to look after our well-being in all of these areas. Let not the rich man boast in his riches.

I think it's true I came across a comment in John L. Mackay's commentary on Jeremiah which incidentally you get your hands on it's a superb commentary on Jeremiah.

And here's a reference there to some people that have done investigations into the world of Jeremiah. What he says is that in Jeremiah's day it's reckoned that between 3 and 5% of the people of Judah actually owned between 50 and 70% of the land.

That's why you find in Jeremiah all through Jeremiah's prophecy that's why you find such powerful blunt references to the way that the rich are exploiting the poor.

To the way that the poor don't have a voice in that society. Of course they don't have a voice in that society because most of the things that really matter financially and in terms of property are in the hand of the rich few.

[23 : 40] Doesn't it sound familiar? Well that's what we have to face in the situation of our day as well. Human nature has not changed since Jeremiah's day.

And human nature left to itself will always go in this direction. It will always be taken up with all of these three things. And you see what these three things combine together and without God being in the picture they really amount very much to individualism.

And individualism is not a good thing. It's not a good thing in the church and it's not a good thing in the life of any nation. Because it's individualism that leads to all sorts of things such as selfishness and pride and arrogance and disputes with others and jealousies.

All of these things come when you really just home things in on the individual. And one of the things that we said in the statement that came out from ourselves as a church is that whatever the outcome of the referendum were to be and in the fact that it's been as it is, the one thing we must get away from is an overemphasis on the individual and that we come to be more and more a society that looks to the needs of others as well as ourselves.

In fact that's what the Bible actually gives us, isn't it? Jeremiah is actually taking us to the source of all of these things. I was spending a bit more time on this than I had anticipated but look at the way Jeremiah brings us to the very source of these things in verses 12 and 13.

[25 : 17] What he's saying is in verses 12 and 13, who is the man so wise that he can understand this? Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness so that no one passes through?

And the Lord says, because they have forsaken my law that I set before them and have not obeyed my voice, have walked in accord with it, but have stubbornly followed their own hearts.

And I've gone after the Baals as their fathers taught them. These words terrify me. They should terrify you too.

I know everything's in the hands of the Lord and we have to look to the Lord who governs over everything. But this is what Jeremiah was saying in his day, generation after generation before him had passed on this dreadful cutting of God out of the picture, not really being serious with God, and this is the kind of thing that was the product of that in Jeremiah's day.

People boasting in their wisdom, in their might, in their riches, and the poor left to fend for themselves. That's the source of it, and that's what is dangerous about the secularist agenda.

[26 : 40] It wants to take God out of the public's life altogether. Privatize it. It's okay. Religion's fine if you keep it within your own life and within your own home.

That's what the secular says. But if the church wants to be the church, yes, but let them keep their belief to themselves. Let's not make them public. Let's not, the secular says, let's not allow the church to suggest that anything to do with the Bible has a place in public life, in public office, in the government of the country, in forming policies.

Let me just read to you a member of the National Secular Society, Professor Peter Atkins. He's a professor of chemistry in Oxford University.

Someone who has human wisdom, and probably might enrich us too. I regard teaching religion, he says, as purveying lies.

To assert God did it is no more than an admission of ignorance dressed deceitfully as an explanation. To say that God made the world is simply a more or less sophisticated way of saying we don't understand how the universe originated.

[28 : 00] a God insofar as it is anything. That's how he puts it. A God insofar as it is anything is an admission of ignorance.

A God insofar as it is anything is an admission of ignorance. Now I know that's just one man. But that's an agenda in secularist terms that's being put to our people as the way forward for this nation. We could certainly say quite clearly in reply that our God is far from being an admission of ignorance or you could turn it the other way.

An atheist insofar as it is anything is an admission of ignorance. It is God who saves. the fool says in his heart there is no God.

But this is the challenge to the church and the challenge to ourselves and the gospel shows us a better way than that. A way that Jeremiah is actually bringing before us now.

[29 : 18] When he says let him who boasts boast in this that he understands and knows me that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love justice righteousness in the earth for in these things I delight declares the Lord.

What is the alternative to the secularist agenda? Is it just keep religion to yourself? Jeremiah certainly does not think so and the Bible elsewhere fits in with everything he is saying.

This truth that God has given us is truth for public use and public application bodies for public office for governments as well as individuals.

And God is saying instead of boasting in human wisdom and might and riches boast in this that you know and understand that I am the Lord.

It's another world isn't it to the secularist world. If we are going to boast in anything Jeremiah is saying as a people let it be in this. If our people and our nation and ourselves in the church are going to be founded and grounded upon something substantial something that is really worth being grounded in let it be this that we know and understand the Lord who he is and what he does and what is it he is and does.

[30 : 51] What is it that I am the Lord? That's not going to go away however much a secular or atheistic agenda wins the day. God doesn't hold referenda as to whether he exists or not.

He's not interested in what people really think of him or otherwise because the truth that he is and what he does simply remains as it is and nothing can change that.

I am the Lord. I am the Lord. and I am the Lord who practices who does who performs steadfast love justice and righteousness in the earth.

For these things I delight. Now we're just going to mention them in passing. They're big things.

We're really at the very heart of Old Testament theology at the very heart of what the Old Testament says is so important to us as human beings.

Steadfast love of God the justice of God the righteousness of God steadfast love of God his love and commitment to his covenant and to his people the justice of God by which God actually governs all things over which he presides and the justice of God the government of God it's marked by truth by equity by being absolutely transparent and clear there are no greerious with God he is just and exercises justice in his rule and righteousness righteousness is the idea or the matter of conforming to a certain standard and of course it's God's own standard the standard of life and lifestyle that he expects of us the standard that is true of himself that he is true to he is true to himself he's never against himself he's never different to what his own righteousness is in anything he does he's the

[33 : 13] God of righteousness who is righteous in himself when he says that he delights in these things the idea in that is that God delights in seeing these things in our lives too in the life of any people that's what Jeremiah is complaining about these things have virtually gone from his society love commitment justice righteousness truth honesty integrity if anyone will boast he says let him boast in this that he understands and knows me that I am the Lord that I am the Lord who works in these areas of love and justice and righteousness that's the secular delusion that the prophet is answering in the boasting that we have to make in God that's the answer for our nation that's the answer for our day for our world that's what the gospel brings to us

I'm just going to conclude very briefly with the second delusion it's a religious delusion that he's getting here at the people of Judah especially his own people Jeremiah's own people when he's saying here in verses 25 and 26 the days are coming when I will punish says the Lord all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh these nations that he mentions Egypt Judah Edom the sons of Ammon Moab and all who dwell in the desert they all practice circumcision as well as the people of Israel or Judah but what he's saying is remarkably he's including Judah in this that they are circumcised only in the flesh what does that mean it means that what God had always specified since he instructed Abraham to circumcise his son and his household and instructed that this would be kept by the

Jewish people down through the years what he always had along with the outward matter of physical circumcision was circumcision of the heart that's why Paul in Romans 2 is saying a Jew is not one who is simply that outwardly by being born a Jew or being circumcised a Jew is one who is

inwardly a Jew and circumcision is not that simply in the flesh it is also circumcision of the heart in other words God was always emphasizing for these people it wasn't enough for them to be circumcised physically that had to be accompanied by a circumcision of the heart the heart being cleansed the heart being regenerated the heart being renewed the heart being dedicated to God which that outward circumcision was a sign of and what he's saying is that all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart there is such a thing and it's there in our day as well as religious delusion I'm a Christian because I go to church I'm a Christian because my father or mother was a Christian I'm a Christian because I live a respectful life I live a decent civil life I've never killed anyone I've never really involved myself in any crime of that kind I'm a Christian because I take communion I'm a Christian because I meet with others who say they're Christians that's religious delusion that's not what makes you a Christian it has to be the matter of the heart and God is saying to us as a nation whatever outward marks you have that appear to give respect to Christianity that appear to be giving respect to me as God that appear to be giving me an equal place along with others if I don't see circumcision of the heart then you're no better than any other people and you certainly don't have my approval because circumcision baptism righteousness is a matter of the heart and there's the challenge for us today it forms really two parts how much do we contrast with the world around us how much are we as Jesus teaches us in the

Sermon the Mount a light that is set not under a bushel but on a candlestick a light that shows itself to be different to the darkness around it a city that is set on a hill which cannot be hid how much of a contrast are we in our lives to the unbelieving secular minded world world and the other side is this how much do we conform as well as contrast how much do we contrast with the world how much do we conform to Jesus to the values of Jesus to the principles that Jesus in his own life followed how much do we conform to the lifestyle that Jesus is an example of a lifestyle of humility of self denial of considering others better than ourselves not equality better than ourselves how much do we conform to

[39 : 16] Jesus in the way of 1 Peter 2 where Jesus is set before us as an example you are called to this he says knowing that he has left you an example that you should follow in his steps there's a secular delusion we must face up to we must challenge with the gospel there's a religious delusion we must face up to we must not be giving in to it ourselves and we must face it in the nation of our day and as we get to face these delusions may it be true that God will come and that God will empower us and that he will enable us to make our boast in himself that we increasingly as a people know and understand that he is the Lord let's pray Lord our

God we would seek to commit our way to you both in terms of what we are as people in your church in the world and what we are as a nation as a people who inhabit this land Lord we pray that you would direct our ways in your own truth that you would direct those who lead us in that same truth also that you would give your people the facility and the opportunity of contributing to the well-being of the nation that you would make your gospel to be a means of power and influence in your church and beyond receive our thanks now we pray and pardon us our many sins for Jesus sake Amen Amen