

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

FURROW

The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Jessie Rogers

To Tear Down
and to Build Up:
insights from
Jeremiah for the
Irish Church

February 2020

To Tear Down and to Build Up: insights from Jeremiah for the Irish Church

Jessie Rogers

According to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, prophets have a two-fold task: they critique the dominant cultural imagination and they energise God's people with an alternative vision that embodies God's dream for humanity.¹ Prophets also summon people to grieve, because it is grief that breaks through the numbness or complacency that keeps a community from moving toward this alternative vision. The prophets of the exile in particular sought to enable the people of God to relinquish the *old* so that they could receive the *new* – that which is initially both unknown and unwanted – from the hand of God. In Brueggemann's writings, the ancient biblical prophets are brought into conversation with the dominant North American narrative, with its military-industrial complex, rampant consumerism, individualism, and patriotic Christianity. I employ Brueggemann's schema but follow the trajectory of the texts to an actualisation in my own context, bringing those prophetic voices to bear on the situation of the Church in Ireland which has lost its hegemony in a bewilderingly brief period.

Taking a cue from Jeremiah's criticism of Zion theology with its trust in God's absolute commitment to the Jerusalem Temple and the Davidic king, and his interpretation of the Babylonians as the instrument of God's judgement, I venture into the disturbing territory of considering whether, in the ravages of the secularist agenda and hostile media and the implosion of the bastion of Irish Catholicism in recent decades, one might not similarly glimpse the *hand of God at work*. If we follow this possibility, then we can also find in Jeremiah's prophecies a path from *denial*, through *grief*, to a renewed *hope* in the future that God creates.

1 See in particular *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd edition, Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2001; and *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1986.

Jessie Rogers is a lecturer in Sacred Scripture at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

Ultimately, this paper is interested in the transformational reading of Scripture. It offers some texts from Jeremiah as ‘word of God’ for today in Ireland. As community of faith we hear the same biblical texts in different times and contexts, but sometimes these texts that ‘linger’ in the tradition seem to ‘explode’ as they make ‘poignant, astonishing, compelling, and illuminating’ contact with our present experience.² This is what happens in the rigorous practice of *lectio divina* through which the text is actualised in our lives. The contours of the text shape our imagination and set the fundamental line of meaning along which new meanings will be uncovered.³ But there is also the leap in faith at the invitation of the Spirit to finding where what happens in the text happens also in life. We begin to see the world through the lens of the text. “The text does not need to be *applied* to our situation. Rather, our situation needs to be *submitted* to the text for a fresh discernment.”⁴

I

The Jeremiah tradition arose out the great crisis of exile, and particularly 587 BCE when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Babylonians. The counter voices with which Jeremiah is in dispute are named as the king and princes, the prophets and the priests. These are the ones that lived by and promoted the royal temple ideology which they believed had divine legitimation. What we can call *Zion Theology* proclaimed the inviolability of the Temple and the eternity of the Davidic Dynasty by virtue of God’s covenant with David (2 Sam 7 and 1 Chron 14). Jeremiah’s interlocutors were convinced that God could not forsake the Temple or the Davidic King. They believed that God was obligated to uphold this way of life. They could even invoke Isaiah of Jerusalem in support of their position. Isaiah preached hope in a time of darkness by drawing upon the Davidic promise. These are the texts we hear at Christmas – the sign of Emmanuel given to Ahaz (Isaiah 7) and the promise of the child born and the son given to those who walked in the land of the shadow (Isaiah 9).

Jeremiah’s vocation is “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10). The verbs evoke the twin prophetic task of critiquing and energising. The two-to-one ratio of destructive and constructive verbs is indicative of the

2 Walter Brueggemann, *Texts that Linger. Words that Explode*, (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 1.

3 The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) 75.

4 Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah. Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 18.

emphasis in the Jeremiah tradition. Jeremiah's task is to help the people to go into exile, therefore the stress is on the *dismantling*. But, as this commission makes clear, the dismantling is the prelude to *newness*: building and planting.

II

Brueggemann, reading within his own North American context, sees in the prophetic critique of royal-temple ideology a profound destabilising of the military industrial complex and patriotic Christianity. Although *Prophetic Imagination* was first written in the 1970s, I am convinced that that analysis remains depressingly relevant today. But I am interested in the resonances of Jeremiah for my own context, *Ireland*. Here I will focus particularly on the trust that the people of God placed in the Temple and their devastation when that was destroyed. The Solomonic Temple, as the successor to the Tabernacle constructed at Sinai, was both the symbol and the guarantee for God's presence in their midst. When that was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, the obvious interpretation was that Israel's God was too weak to protect it. Marduk, the god of Babylon, trumps Yahweh. Here, though, is Jeremiah's surprising move: Jeremiah claims that in the destruction of the Temple, *God is at work*. It is the tearing down of the old which has ceased to function as the life-giving presence of God in the midst of God's people. This happens as judgement, yes, but also so that the new can emerge.

When we hear these texts as word of God, it is not to gain a purely intellectual understanding of the situation. There are other good explanations for the state of the Church in Ireland – sociological and political – even as the exile could be explained by Babylonian expansionism and the misguided political manoeuvring of the Jerusalem establishment. But that is not the explanation that the Jeremiah tradition gives. It chooses to see the hand of God at work in the dismantling.

This is captured in the Temple Sermon (Jer 7:1-15)⁵ which is “perhaps the clearest and most formidable statement we have of the basic themes of the Jeremiah tradition.”⁶ Jeremiah preaches in the Temple courtyard, mocking the people's superstitious trust in Temple with a threefold “The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord” (Jer 7:4). He directs their attention to Shiloh, an earlier site of the sanctuary of God which was destroyed. The narrative account of Shiloh given in 1 Samuel 4 does not speak explicitly of the destruction of the site, but tells

5 The background narrative to this prophecy is given in *Jeremiah* 26.

6 Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, 77.

THE FURROW

the even more horrifying account of how the ark of the covenant, God's throne, was captured by the Philistines. Jeremiah makes clear that destruction was *God's doing* (Jer 7:12). Jeremiah in this homily models the dynamic analogy approach to listening to the tradition.⁷ It would be natural for Jeremiah's audience to interpret Shiloh as the opposite of Jerusalem: Shiloh was a northern shrine rejected by God. But Jeremiah points to similarities – Jerusalem and Shiloh are both places where God has put God's name, which will nevertheless be destroyed. This drawing of parallels invites our own drawing of imaginative parallels. Even more, we have the invitation of the Gospels, which put Jesus in a similar position to Jeremiah in the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. When Jesus clears the Temple, he echoes this very text in his accusation that the Temple has become a 'den of robbers' (Matt 21:13 cf Jer 7:11). And Jesus also predicted and grieved the Temple's destruction (Matt 23:7-24:2).

The hope in Jeremiah is expressed as a "New Covenant" (Jer 31). Perhaps in light of our new covenant in Christ, we are tempted to say that we are at the end of history, that the destruction of the Temple and its rebuilding in the Body of Christ has happened once and for all, that these Old Testament words can no longer apply to us. But, as the readings each Advent remind us, the biblical tradition looks forward to the Day of Christ, to the *Parousia*. Sunday by Sunday, 'we profess his death and proclaim his resurrection until he comes again.' The fullness of the Kingdom is still future. Eschatological hope, an openness to newness, is intrinsic to our Faith.

We could not imagine the institutional Church in Ireland to be in jeopardy even 25 years ago. But the dearth of vocations, the inability to integrate children into the church after the sacraments of initiation, the profound disillusionment from scandal after scandal, falling Mass attendance, all point to a structure that is tottering. When the institution that is taken to represent God's presence is corrupted by clericalism, by abuse, by a profound passification of the laity, could it not be that the life-giving work of God's Spirit must once again *destroy* as a prelude to *replanting*? Could it be that the dearth of priestly vocations is due, not to people not listening or to the lack of faith among young people, but to the deliberate silence of the Holy Spirit? Could this be a dismantling of a particular model of church so that there is no other option but for a new one to emerge? One cannot come to the point of accepting this breaking down and uprooting without entering into profound *grief*. The Temple was not just the site of abuse of power. It was

7 J.A. Sanders, "Hermeneutics," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crimm (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1976): 402-407, here 405.

also the place where the people worshipped, where their identity as people of God was forged and confirmed. The institutional church in Ireland, despite its complicity in so much abuse of power, is also a holder of so much of our history with God, of sacred moments and treasured practices.

III

Prophets speaking poetry can utter things that the analytical theologian would not dare say. The biblical tradition offers the symbol of the destruction of the Temple and the catastrophic ending, which is exile, as a way to name a reality for the community of faith. We enter a symbol through appropriation and participation. One cannot enter this poetry authentically unless one puts oneself where the text leads, to a place of *grief and horror*. The only way to enter into this world, to see our own world through the mirror that Jeremiah holds up, is to grieve. When we grieve, the numbness gives way to a cry – rage and sorrow and bereftness. This cuts through all the scheming, the rationalising, the trying to fix things by tweaking around the edges. And in this grief, the fallow land can be broken up and sown. The way can be made for newness.

Numbness can show itself in denial and escapism. A favourite apocryphal phrase attributed to priests in Ireland is, “Sure, it will see me out.” We go on with our heads in the sand. I also think that this denial is seen in the raging of the faithful against rampant secularism in Ireland. Despite the kernel of truth in this criticism of the ‘hostile other’, the effect is to pose the problem as something ‘out there’. It is to direct the strong emotion outwards and so sidestep the devastating introspection that is called for. This numbness is also seen when Catholic commentators try to lessen the horror of abuse cover-up and other historic atrocities by pointing to the broader malaise in society. We can admit that the church is not perfect, but can we see it through the lens that Jeremiah offers? The people to whom Jeremiah speaks do not believe his assessment. They claim that: “We are wise and the law of the Lord is with us” (Jer 8:8). They do not take “the wound of God’s people” seriously, and hold out false hope and comfort (Jer 8:11). Jeremiah often laments that the people of God have no shame. They do not know how to blush (Jer 8:12). To blush in this sense is not to be ashamed of our faith, but to acknowledge how the Gospel has been distorted and obscured by the very ones who are expected to represent God in the world, and to grieve that deeply.

Paradoxically, only when we recognise the *hopelessness* of the situation and open ourselves to the grief it evokes, is the way opened for true hope. Otherwise, it is the hope of positive thinking,

THE FURROW

denial, self-reliance, or worshipping an idol which is some form of a parochial god. In the Jeremiah tradition, the false prophet Hananiah preached a quick recovery (Jer 28). But Jeremiah is adamant: there is no hope for the people except through exile. It is only after he has taken apart Hananiah's false hope of a short exile - two years and they will be home - that Jeremiah writes his letter of hope to the exile: "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future" (Jer 29:11). That hope is on the other side of chaos. It does not circumvent the exile but emerges through and beyond it. Exile, a symbol of alienation and loss, is also the place in which God is found. It is the place of surprising newness.

What does Jeremiah invite the *Church in Ireland* to today? He invites us to genuine grieving over what we are losing. Yes, he also invites us to hope, but not too quickly. Prophets are remarkably sketchy on the details of what people are to do. There is a story told of an encounter between William Sloane Coffin, then chaplain at Yale University, and Henry Kissinger. When challenged to provide a workable means to bring the troops home from Vietnam, the chaplain replied: "Mr Kissinger, our job is to proclaim that justice must roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. Your job is to work out the details of the irrigation system."⁸ Prophets awaken us to the possibility of a different world, one in which God's will is done, on earth as it is in heaven. Prophets invite us to a different way of seeing and hearing. They also help us to discern. We need to know what newness comes from God and must be embraced, and what we must say 'no' to. We do not need rules for that or a step-by-step plan so much as a deep sense of God's own pathos and dream for humanity.

Jeremiah invites us to recognise and to name our grief for what it is, a response to dying, to ending and to loss. It is a 'sickness unto death' except for the grace of God. We must resist the temptation to try to dodge the *grieving process* or to short-circuit the *dismantling process*. Do not push through too quickly to a solution or complacently deny the crisis. Stay with grieving in hope and let the newness which is God's doing emerge. Two spiritual practices that would facilitate the Church in Ireland undertaking this arduous journey through grief to hope are liturgical grieving and *lectio divina*. I am not sure what liturgical grieving can look like, but I am convinced that we need to face the tragedy, the loss, the shame, the anger, the hopelessness and put the language of word and ritual action on it. And we need to do this communally and publically. We also need to really hear the scriptures in a way that surprises

8 Robert McAfee Brown, *Making Peace in the Global Village* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1981), 19.

and unsettles us. *Lectio divina* and/or homilies that are born from this prayerful, attentive engagement with scripture will facilitate a transformative encounter with the word of God.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted (Matt 5:5). The Psalms are insistent: God hears the cry of the afflicted. There is probably no sidestepping the painful transformation of exile, but the journey does not end there. When we admit our utter poverty, we will mourn. It is that numbness-shattering grief that will open our heart to being comforted, strengthened, and led toward a hopeful future.

Benedict and the future of Europe. We are the used to speaking of St Benedict as one of the patrons of Europe. This is partly in acknowledgement of how Benedictine houses helped to preserve something of the coherence of a religiously focused culture in the uncertain and often chaotic period after the fall of Rome, as the new Germanic kingdoms emerged in the west. But is there a sense in which we can speak of Benedict and his rule as offering an orientation for Europe's future? In the half-secularized, morally confused and culturally diverse continent we now inhabit, does the Holy Rule still provide a beacon for common life? I want to argue that it does: the Rule, after all, is not an archaeological document but something that is continually being reinterpreted in the life of the communities that are based upon it – like the Scriptures themselves.

– Rowan Williams, *The Way of St. Benedict* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum) p. 66.