

‘NOT WITH A BANG BUT A WHIMPER’

The title is taken from the final words of the poet TS Eliot’s masterpiece, *The Hollow Men* (1925). Eliot’s weary conclusion about the world’s end could also be used of the main character in this series of readings. King David is nearing the end of his life, and we sense that he is now a broken man. His political and military victories are distant memories. The man who united warring tribes and established a kingdom is now a shadow of his former self.

His daughter Tamar is raped by her half-brother Amnon (2 Samuel 13:1-22), who in turn is then murdered by another one of his sons, Absalom (2 Samuel 13:23-39). Absalom plots a coup d’état against David and comes to a brutal end (2 Samuel 18:9-15). Much of David’s history does not make for easy reading, and without giving the game away, this series of readings will feel uncomfortable to our modern western sensibilities.

Themes of revenge and bloodshed abound (chapters 20 and 21), sitting uneasily alongside wonderful songs of praise (chapters 22; 23:1-7). The series ends on an ambivalent note, as David courts the Lord’s displeasure by carrying out a national census (chapter 24:10). But despite his many failures, Israel remembered him as their greatest king, and Jesus himself was hailed as a Son of David (e.g., Matthew 15:22).

MY DEAR SON

A couple of the books I've enjoyed have been written as correspondence: the real-life *84 Charing Cross Road* (Helene Hanff, published in 1970 but written from 1949 onward), and the more recent, fictional *Meet Me at the Museum* (Anne Youngson, 2018). In both, friendship slowly grows between two strangers, and satisfying relationships ensue.

Paul's letters to Timothy are two of the four epistles written as letters to individuals (the other two being Titus and Philemon). They are written, however, as a result of the existing relationship between the two, developed through Paul's second and third missionary journeys. Rick Warren likens their relationship to mentoring and suggests it began as 'parenting'—a young disciple with an older one, grown through 'pace-setting'—Paul setting Timothy an example to follow that resulted in 'partnering'—with them being co-workers.* While this second letter is written in that last stage, close to the end of Paul's life, his ongoing deep affection for Timothy as a son in faith is evident. So is his deep desire for Timothy to stand firm, even through suffering, and to teach the truth and fulfill his calling. The first letter contained advice regarding leadership and church matters. This one is more personal, more concerned with Timothy's own faith and the challenges leadership brings.

Whether young or older as a person, or as a disciple of Christ, and whatever position we may have in church, I pray we will all benefit as we consider Paul's wisdom to his younger, much-loved friend.

* <https://pastors.com/paul-timothy/>

A MAN FAITHFUL TO THE END

We love it when we sense that the Scriptures are speaking personally to us—and quite rightly too. God is indeed alive and still at work through his Word and through ordinary people. Jeremiah is a vulnerable character, quite shy and, at times, uncertain. These are not factors that matter to God, who calls Jeremiah to an inspired, dynamic ministry. Wonderful—these are all aspects we will explore in the coming days, and we will find that the book of Jeremiah continues to be relevant today.

That said, it is also important to acknowledge that these words are coming to us from the deep mists of time. As Jeremiah lamented the downfall of Israel, ancient Britons were plodding through the Iron Age. Modern assumptions may well be unhelpful. I just referred to a ‘book’ but, in truth, no such thing existed in Old Testament times. We should not always expect clear narrative sequence or a logical development of ideas in Jeremiah. Nor should we be shocked if the people in these passages behave and express feelings in ways that seem alien or even disgusting to us. Let me declare, as we start, that there are things here that I do not understand. However, there is also much, on every page, through which the Holy Spirit can minister to his church. So let us approach this sacred text with awe and humility, but also with confidence. People have not changed so very much since Jeremiah’s day—and our wise and loving God, not one bit.

DYING TO SELF

'As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven...' (Luke 9:51), Jesus heads for Jerusalem, to his death for the sins of the whole world. And this is only chapter 9 of 24 in Luke! Yes, the gospel story is mostly about this.

Yet Jesus isn't focused on his death, but on the joy ('heaven') that lies beyond. That has to be right for us too, doesn't it, if we're following Jesus? So, there's no panic or desperation in Jesus, but a deep sense of purpose (as in John 13:1-5, when Jesus, knowing he's about to die, picks up a towel and starts washing his disciples' feet).

Following Jesus means living a life focused on sacrifice—on the generous giving of ourselves—not on selfish gain. It is about 'dying to self'—not physically dying but asking for Jesus' help to deal a death blow to selfishness.

I've been following Jesus for decades. You'd think I'd know what it's all about by now! But as we travel with Jesus on the way up to Jerusalem, I'm going to commit to letting his words and actions challenge my understanding about what it means to follow him. Will you join me? It won't be a comfortable journey, but I so long to be doing the right thing for the right reasons, knowing there's nowhere I'd rather be than close to Jesus, and nothing I'd rather be doing than living the way he wants me to.

LIVING LIFE GOD'S WAY

Our readings over the next week or so are part of a range of teachings that Jesus gave his disciples and various crowds. They are making their way toward Jerusalem, where Jesus would ultimately be crucified and rise again.

And they are challenging readings! In them, Jesus frequently juxtaposed a life of repentance and following God versus a life without God. His teaching was sometimes so well received that people trampled over each other (12:1). But he wasn't always so popular. So, we will be asked to consider our love for and commitment to God in a world that doesn't generally seek to follow him.

We will meet people who are listening to Jesus (as well as some who are determinedly not); we will meet those living wise and faithful lives (and those who are not). So, let's pray that we listen to Jesus carefully, and with wisdom, as we study his Word over the coming days.

One of my favorite readings in this collection is in Luke 13:10-13, where Jesus sees a disabled woman and beckons her to come to him, and he heals her. As we begin these readings, let us ask God to give us eyes to see how he loves us, and is calling us to come to him and follow him, even when we might feel unworthy. We will also read in Luke 12:28-30 that God will clothe us and give us all we need, so we don't need to worry. We have a God who cares for us and meets us where we are. May that encourage you today.

HAVE IT YOUR WAY

I can't sugarcoat it: these chapters at the end of Jeremiah are brutal. We are going to be reading our way through a dire period of Israel's history, watching them make decision after terrible decision and reaping the seeds they have chosen to sow. Jeremiah faithfully delivers God's warnings—getting himself into a whole lot of trouble as a result—but Israel and her leaders are not listening. What unfolds is therefore on their heads.

That may be logical, but it is still unsettling and upsetting to encounter the outworking of God's anger on this stiff-necked nation of his: slow starvation under siege; large-scale slaughter; the desecration of their temple; exile from the Promised Land.

It is okay to acknowledge our discomfort. We can come to God with our questions, our fears, our dismay, at the harshness and vitriol of these words his prophet says are his. He has given us his Holy Spirit to reveal him to us; he sent his Son to walk among us. He will help us wrestle through these troubling episodes in salvation history.

In all his dealings with us, God gives us freedom. It is this freedom that enables genuine relationship between the divine and us, who are made in his image. God, through Jeremiah, urged his people to repent and be his again. And in the end, he let them have it their way. The same choice is ours today.

FRIENDS REUNITED

One advantage of being a preacher's wife is that millions of his spoken words get recorded, or even videotaped, for posterity. My husband died over four years ago. Occasionally, I turn on one of his sermons, not so much to listen to it, but just to hear his voice.

Having agreed to write for Discovery, I listened to a series of his lectures on Philippians, delivered in St Paul's Finchley, London, in 2011. This time I wanted to hear the content of the lectures, not listen to his voice. They have inspired and shaped these notes.

Paul was living under house arrest, probably in Rome, in the late 50s and early 60s. He sensed the end of his life was near but was as energetic as ever for the gospel. The whole palace guard (where elite soldiers and prisoners resided) had heard about him.

Philippi, in northeastern Greece, was a Roman colony for discharged veteran soldiers. (The letter is full of military allusions.) He visited the city at least twice (Acts 16; 20:6), nurturing the embryonic faith of the socially diverse Philippian church. Among the first three converts were Lydia, a prayerful, wealthy Jewish immigrant widow, a local Greek slave girl, and an official in the prison service.

Paul really loved these Christians. His appreciative personal letter reads as one man to his friends, urging them to be united and strong in faith when faced with opposition. Its powerful message remains so true today.