
The sermon text for today is based on the First Reading, Jeremiah Chapter 1, verses 4 to 8.

Provided by The Lutheran Church of Australia

“I Chose You “

About 30 years ago, a high school student receiving some advice from a careers counsellor about what possible career path he might take. He had an interest in art, especially fantasy art, and science and his mother was a very good landscape painter and so the counsellor advised him to take up computer art. Now remember this was 30 years ago. The once student recalls, “I just laughed in his face and said, ‘I can’t do that. That’s crazy!’” He knew that computer graphics were so primitive and in no way compared to the great works of fantasy art that he admired. The only real way to get anywhere was with a pencil and sketch book or paints and an easel, neither of which he felt comfortable with. He walked out of the counsellor’s office in disbelief that a career advisor could give such bad advice.

It was only a few years later that computers and programs were developed to enable images to be edited on a computer. And then the flood gates opened and computer generated images (CGI) were born. Images were not only able to be created but also to be animated within a virtual space and even integrated into images from real life. So these days a whole raft of movies are made with computer generated images. Movies like *Lord of the Ring*, *The Hobbit*, and whole lot of futuristic movies. They are now even able to make them in 3D.

The young man who said laughingly “I can’t do that” has had to eat his words. What he thought he would never be able to do in just a short while has become possible. He had the skills; he just needed the support in the form of the right technology to be able to fulfil his calling.

Today’s Old Testament reading tells us about another young man, Jeremiah. He said, “I can’t do that”. He had the skills and all he needed was the right support to fulfil his calling.

Jeremiah grew up in a small town near Jerusalem. I’m sure he was a typical teenage lad. Everyone knew Jeremiah simply as Hilkiyah’s lad. He was just another kid from the village, but God had other plans for Jeremiah.

God said to Jeremiah, “*Before you were born I selected you to be a prophet to the nations.*” We know from his writings that Jeremiah knew his scriptures very well. He would have known how God called Moses who was much wiser and older than he was when God called him to be a prophet and look how difficult it was for Moses. To be called and sent like Moses – that’s crazy.

Jeremiah’s response was, “Thank you God but I can’t. I’m just a kid, who would listen to me? I wouldn’t know what to say and how to say it. You’d better pick someone else for a job like that”.

When we say, “No thanks, I can’t” we may use other words that are gentler and perhaps less direct, but mean the same when we are called on to do something that is right outside of our comfort zone?

We think that we don’t have the right skills to do something like that.

We can’t imagine ourselves doing something like that.

It’s never crossed our mind that to do anything like that.

We can’t see how we can fit that into our already busy lives.

There are other people far better able to do something like that.

But God isn’t giving Jeremiah a choice here. He doesn’t say, “Hey Jeremiah, how would like to be a prophet and tell my people some stuff they won’t want to hear”? God doesn’t back down on what he wanted Jeremiah to do. He says to Jeremiah, “Don’t call yourself a lad, you *are* my prophet. Go to my people”.

You see what has happened here. God doesn’t see Jeremiah as a boy from some obscure little village. He gives him a new identity – not a lad but a prophet.

God has given us a new identity. He views us in a special way and urges us to see ourselves not just as some insignificant person but as *‘royal priests and a holy nation’, ‘God’s chosen and special people’* *‘chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God’* to use the words of Peter’s first letter.

Jesus claimed us as his special people at our baptism. He called us to be chosen people through the Bible. He has involved in his saving plan. He has given us a new identity, as well as a new responsibility. And so just as Jeremiah was called to be his prophet, he calls us to be his disciples in the world and among the people we have daily contact. God is serious when he calls anyone to do something for him – Moses, Gideon, Amos, Isaiah and the 12 disciples found this out. I think Jeremiah had good grounds on which to back out of God’s plan for him – after all who would ask a boy to do a man’s job – but God saw things differently.

So far, so good. Talking about Jeremiah having a new identity when he was called to be a prophet and the new responsibilities that went along with it, and noticing the parallel that exists with our call as baptised members of God’s family and the new identity and new responsibility that it entails, all sounds very nice, but let’s get real.

When that phone rings, and we hear of someone in distress, or grief, or pain, we’re faced with the question of whether we can or cannot bring a word of grace and healing, and comfort to that person.

When we are challenged to consider being involved in some kind of service to other people and it doesn’t suit us (so we think), that’s when all this gets just a bit too hard.

And like Jeremiah we find ourselves backing off. That’s normal. When the going gets tough, who doesn’t want to find the easy way out? In fact, some of the times when God would have us speak are often some of the most difficult situations, those are the circumstances that we could possibly lose sleep over. It really is safer and easier to do nothing.

Again and again in the Bible we find people who were hesitant to take up God's challenges to speak out when they were given the opportunity. Each time we hear Moses, or Jeremiah, or Jonah try to back out of God's plan for them we realise that our fears are no different to these famous people. Our feelings of inadequacy of not knowing what to do what to say, how we will cope in the situation, the fear of failure, of wanting to run and leave it to someone else are the same feelings that Jonah or Jeremiah or Moses experienced.

God knows our fears and why we are hesitant just as he knew what was going on in Jeremiah's heart when God called him to speak his Word to the people. God said to him, *"Do not say that you are too young, but go to the people I send you to, and tell them everything I command you to say. Do not be afraid of them, for I will be with you to protect you. I, the Lord, have spoken!"* Not only that, Jeremiah had the added sensation of God touching his lips, placing into them the very words he was to speak, the words of judgement and grace. God said, *"Listen, I am giving you the words you must speak."*

God makes the same promises to those whom he calls in the 21st century. We too are part of his saving plan.

We have been brought into his church,
we have been made Jesus' disciples,
we have been baptised and been made a part of Jesus' life, death and resurrection,
that means we are part of his saving plan for the world,
and he will help us in our times of hesitancy. Like Jeremiah we can be full of excuses and objections and ask 'why me'.

God's words to Jeremiah ring in our ears, *"Do not be afraid.... I will be with you..."* Reassured with those words we can take the risk and step out in reaching to that neighbour in pain, that friend who would appreciate some guidance and help. Why should we feel paralyzed by what we perceive as a lack of competence, our not knowing just the right words? Who are we to judge the effect that the Word of God has in the lives of other people even when it comes from our own lips?

And remember we're assured that his grace will multiply our efforts when all we can offer is an embrace, a halting prayer, a few simple words in the Lord's name. It may seem that what we have to offer is so plain, simple and even inadequate, but be assured God has a marvellous way of using our seemingly inadequate efforts to bring about good.

It's good to remember that the disciples Jesus chose were ordinary people like Jeremiah – they didn't have any special qualifications of holiness, or wisdom, or training, or potential. They were just ordinary men, who went about ordinary jobs. It is the grace of God that makes a person a follower of Jesus. They didn't rely on their own abilities. They trusted simply in the power of Jesus' word. They had been called and so they acted and spoke God's Word to the best of their ability and trusted the Holy Spirit would somehow use their efforts to bless others.

I read an interesting article about the words "I can't". It said something like this. We often use these words as an excuse but if we say them enough times we begin to send messages to our subconscious about what we can and can't do. Telling yourselves repeatedly that you can't do this,

and can't do that, will have you believing that you can't do much of anything after a while. If you say enough times, "I can't forgive that person", "I can't visit the dying", "I'm no good with kids" you will eventually believe it.

To 60 year old Joe, teenagers were a complete mystery to him and so he labelled them a bunch of ratbags. One Sunday a new kid came to church. He was by himself and Joe was standing by himself and so the pastor introduced them to each other and walked away. There were a few awkward moments and then the two started talking and the 60 year old and 16 year old connected. Joe, who had no time for teenagers, found that he really did have a heart for those who were struggling and losing their way. In his later years God called him and teenagers weren't such a mystery after all. The impact that Joe had on many young lives from then on was attested to at his funeral some years later.

How are we to apply this to our lives? Regardless of our age God calls us to do his work and regardless of our age our first thought is to object and say, "I can't". That doesn't let us off the hook. God in his grace reassures us that what we do will bring blessing to others. In his eyes we are the best person for the job.

By the way, if by chance, you think this story about Jeremiah has nothing to say to you, just wait. It will. At some time, God will call you.