

Reading; Jeremiah 15:15-21

For 40 years I've been a prophet, and for all those 40 years I've been swimming against the tide. Whatever way the country went, God seemed to want me to tell them to do the opposite! And all the time the situation in the country seemed to get worse and worse. Our northern brothers, in Israel, were taken off into exile in Assyria over 100 years ago; only we in Judah were left. I was in Jerusalem, during the reign of four kings. Yes, I walked with kings, but that was no fun, I can tell you, when I had to tell them what God thought of them. "Peace, peace!" they wanted me to say. But there wasn't any peace, and there wasn't going to be any peace, so how could I prophesy it? We were just a little pawn in an international game, Egypt on one side, Babylon on the other, and we prostituted ourselves, like a she-camel on heat, now sucking up to Egypt, now to Babylon. There was no moral fibre in our country: corrupt leaders, corrupt priests, the people worshipping idols - they even went back to human sacrifice in Topheth. And all the other prophets saying, "Don't worry about Babylon. Everything's fine." "In the unlikely event that we're taken into exile, it will only be for two years." God had told me that it would be for 70 years! I was entirely alone.

And so eventually it happened. The Babylonians came. They killed King Zedekiah's sons in front of him; they blinded the king, put chains on him and led him away as a prize to Babylon. The palace in Jerusalem was set on fire, the city walls broken down, the whole city trashed, and almost all the population of the country taken prisoner to Babylon. I was left with a few nobodies. Now at last God gave me some words of hope: "Stay here; you'll be OK; you'll be safe." but, no, the people decided to ignore me - again - and they went off as refugees to Egypt. Egypt - I ask you! I was their prophet so I had to go with them, but you can imagine how popular I am here when I keep telling them they've done the wrong thing. 40 years a prophet, our country smashed, some Jews in Assyria, most in Babylon, and the last foolish few here in Tahpanhes in Egypt!

God, I didn't know it would be this hard when you called me 40 years ago. Yes, you said that I would uproot and tear down, destroy and overthrow - those were your words - but you also said that I would build and plant. And I've seen precious little of that. I've suffered with the people, as you asked me to; I've prayed for them and agonized over them - except for that time when you told me not even to pray for them. And that was hard. I've been furious with them too, as you have, God. They had no shame, they didn't even know how to blush; they were stiff-necked, yes, stiff-necked - you taught me that word. Sometimes I hated them and just longed for you to smash them. And at other times I felt all your love for them pouring into me - and all your frustration.

You asked me to do weird things, like that time you asked me to put on an ox

yoke and carry it around in public to show what Babylon would do to us. I was laughed at for that, and one of the other prophets even broke it. You allowed me to be held prisoner in the palace courtyard, and you let them drop me into a water tank. Fortunately there wasn't much water in it, but I still had to stand in deep mud. I thought sometimes - no, often - that you'd let me down, O God. I was speaking in your name, but they never listened; and you knew they wouldn't listen. Sometimes I decided not to speak up for you and tried to keep it in, but I couldn't. Why did you let this happen to me?

Yes, I've seen your protection, from death threats, when I was rescued from the water tank, and after I was chained up with the other prisoners when Jerusalem fell. And now I understand a little bit of your heart, O God: your pain, your anger, and your longing, longing love for your people. It's broken me sometimes.

Thank you, God, for giving me some glimpses of hope, of your plans to build. Thank you for showing me that you will bring your people home, even though I'll be long gone. And thank you for showing me that a Messiah will come. Thank you that you never, never give up on your people and that you have never given up on me.

But, Lord, did it have to be so hard?

Chris van Straaten