

Sunday 29th January 2024. God's Questions: 'What do you see?'

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Jeremiah 1v4-12 The Call of Jeremiah

⁴ *The word of the LORD came to me, saying,*

⁵ *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew^[a] you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."*

⁶ *"Alas, Sovereign LORD," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young."*

⁷ *But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. ⁸ Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.*

⁹ *Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. ¹⁰ See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."*

¹¹ *The word of the LORD came to me: "What do you see, Jeremiah?"*

"I see the branch of an almond tree," I replied.

¹² *The LORD said to me, "You have seen correctly, for I am watching^[b] to see that my word is fulfilled."*

This week we are looking at the fourth in our series of *God's questions*, reflecting on where we are and how the Lord may be calling us to respond to him in 2024.

This week's question was actually addressed to three different prophets in the Old Testament – Jeremiah, Amos and Zechariah. God asked all three of them the same question twice: 'What do you see?' and they all replied with descriptions of objects that had prophetic meanings which God wanted the people to hear.

Chronologically, Amos was the first to be asked by God 'What do you see?'. He lived and prophesied when the two countries of Israel and Judah still existed, before Israel was conquered by Assyria in 721BC. Jeremiah ministered in the last days of Judah and warned of the judgment to come if they did not repent from their idolatry and dishonesty. Sadly Judah was duly destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586BC and many civilians were taken into captivity in Babylon. Zechariah was then called to prophesy a message of hope about the return of God's people and the rebuilding of the temple.

So Amos and Jeremiah got the short straws, and Jeremiah in particular had a tough time of it, becoming known as a prophet of doom and thorn in the side of Judah and its leaders. But in many ways he was a hero, bravely speaking God's warnings despite his youth and people's indifference to his message.

There is much that we can learn from Jeremiah today. Like Moses, Gideon, Samuel and many others in the Bible, Jeremiah felt inadequate and ill equipped to follow God's call to ministry. His initial reaction is 'Alas Lord I don't know how to speak, I am too young!'

But after touching his lips and telling him not to be afraid, God commissioned him saying "today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

It was Rabbi Abraham Heschel that said 'Words create worlds'. Prophetic words particularly have the power to uproot and tear down but also to build and to plant. What we say and particularly what we envision has huge creative or destructive power. Just like Moses, Jeremiah felt inadequate for the task, but God helped him out of the starting blocks by asking a simple question. 'What do you see?'

In the Old Testament, prophets were called to prophesy accurately on pain of death. If what they said didn't come to pass, they could be executed.

Thankfully after the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord can also receive prophetic insight which is to be weighed and tested for correction, but back in the Old Testament it was a mortal risk and a big deal to attempt to speak for God.

We are not told whether Jeremiah saw an Almond tree physically or whether he saw an impression in his mind's eye, but Jeremiah was particularly commended by God for his clarity: 'You have seen well'. The implication is that it is possible to also see badly, in other words it is easily possible miss the prophetic or only see partially.

We are visual beings. God has made us with eyesight, foresight and insight, and the Bible is rammed full of visions, pictures and allegories that spark our imaginations and cause us to think more deeply about his Word.

Jeremiah saw an Almond tree – *saqed* in the Hebrew, and God said 'you have seen correctly for I am watching - *saqad* to see my word fulfilled'. It is a word play. Like if someone had a prophetic impression of a drum, the Lord might be saying 'That's because I want to drum my word into you!'

So God's question to us today is 'what do you see?'

Spurgeon taught his trainee pastors 'you must be seers before you can be speakers.' We need to let God sanctify our imagination to we can grasp spiritual truths. The most essential truth we need to see is that Jesus lived, died and rose again for the forgiveness of the sins of the whole world. We don't just need to understand the facts of the Gospel but to see in our minds eye the life changing power of the message. As a teenager for a brief moment I saw the power of the cross of Christ like lightning from heaven touching earth and it was an epiphany moment for me. The life and message of Jesus changes lives, brings forgiveness, love and eternal hope. Paul said it is the power of God for those who are being saved.

Every Christian is called to watch for the prompting of the Holy Spirit that reminds us of what God has done through Christ and also what He is wanting to do through us today. Some Christians are also specifically called to be prophets for the church, and Paul encouraged the Christians at Corinth to pray for this greater gifting and to learn to encourage one another in the Lord.

Emma spoke last Sunday evening about discerning our calling for this next season. Paul's letter to the Ephesians tells us that to build up the church some are called to be Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, Evangelists and also Teachers. You can remember the acronym APEST for these gifts which have become known as the five-fold ministry gifts. You can do a survey online to determine which gift you might lean towards. Paul said that the Church is built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets with Christ himself as the chief cornerstone. Primarily I think Paul was referring to the teaching of the New Testament Apostles who taught about Jesus, and the Old Testament prophets who pointed to his arrival. But in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul explains the particular need for contemporary Apostolic and prophetic gifting to head up the leadership of the church. I think of apostolic gifting like captaining the ship whilst the prophets are in charge of the radar. We need to see and discern where God is leading us as a Church, but sometimes that involves prayer and fasting, waiting for clarity of vision.

For quite a number of years I have woken up at 4:44 in the morning. I always wondered if God were speaking to me about something. So I looked up every reference to Chapter 4 verse 44 that I could find, but none resonated with me – it became quite a joke between Mims and me. The hours between 4 and 5 am do seem to be a classic time to wake up as your body chemistry changes in preparation for the morning, but as I was praying about this year ahead, I read a post by Malachi Talabi (great name) in which he recorded that the Lord had woken him up at 4:44 and he felt the Lord saying 2024 would be a year of open doors, because the fourth letter of the Hebrew alphabet is called Dalet meaning 'door'. Now my interest was sparked but I'm not a great fan of intricate details about letters and numbers but then I also read a passage in Ezekiel 41 and 42 all about his vision of the temple and the importance of all the different doors built into it. It struck me that a lot of the current work in our church building is widening and opening up the doors. So what open doors are we praying for at All Saints in 2024?

Well, I am praying for more open doors into our community this year. Our relationships with the schools, the hospital, care homes, the pub and businesses are growing healthily, but it still feels like there are many other doors in the community that are closed. The estates, the families and young adults, but equally it could be that God wants us open up our doors in new ways too. Jesus said 'I am the gate' perhaps the Lord wants us to find ways to live our lives with such purity that people will see that and want to come into the kingdom.

Someone asked me last week what is the vision for All Saints Church. Well for generations this has been a church at the heart of the community, with a mission to simply share the life and message of Jesus with people of all ages and stages. But this year perhaps we should pray into what it means to be open to God, open to the community and open to change through the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 24v33 says 'When you see these things, you know that he is near, right at the door.' Jesus spoke of the need to be watchful for the signs of the times and to be on our guard that our love doesn't grow cold due to increasing wickedness, deception and false prophets. One of the key gifts the church can offer in a world of increasing confusion and misinformation is the discernment that comes from being rooted in the firm foundation of God's word. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom, so we need to keep that as our anchor point.

I received a message from a faithful prayer warrior at All Saints who sometimes has dreams and visions that are worth noting. The message said this:

'As you know , I have had a few dreams and experiences from God recently, but they can all be summed up by a deeper understanding of God's love and compassion for all mankind, whether they know him or not

For those of us who do already know Jesus a verse keeps on coming to mind

"Fan into flame the gifts you received" 1Tim1:6 incl. when you first became a Christian through the Holy Spirit.

I believe Jesus wants to bring about an awakening in All Saints this year through the Gentle administration of the Holy Spirit.

I keep getting pictures of flag stones in the ground being forced upwards by the brilliance of Jesus' love and compassion, (which worldly cares have tried to quench.)'

I asked the staff what they thought 'flagstones in the ground forced upwards by the brilliance of Jesus' love and compassion meant to them.

They thought the flagstones speak of a pathway. As we prepare the way for the Lord, a highway for the Lord will be raised up as he himself shines through us. There is a shaking going on and it is uncomfortable but as proverbs 4 v 18 says:

The path of the righteous is like the morning sun,
shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what makes them stumble.

Let's pray that just as we work to make the paths and doors at All Saints wider and more accessible, that the whole community will feel welcome to come in and that we are also fanned into flame to go out!