

PROMISED LAND

Eden – God's people in God's land, enjoying God's blessing. But the beauty of that situation was lost because of Adam and Eve's sin. Adam was driven out. The rest of the bible is about a search for a Promised Land and a return to that blessing of God's presence, a restored Eden.

People became nomads. Abraham was given a promise that one day there would be a land and countless descendants. Moses continued the journey. Joshua brought people into the new Land. They settled. They forgot about God and the ways they were meant to live. Prophets warn that the unthinkable is about to happen – people will be driven out again, the land will become waste, peace will be destroyed.

'LAND' is more than just a bit of earth. Even in modern times there can be fierce neighbourhood disputes over garden fences and who owns the hedge; think of how the land was used in WW2 to grow as much food as possible; think of how parts of the world where trees have been cut down have seen soil erosion and crops failing; think of the refugees fleeing their own land; think of how the Palestinian people are still fighting for land when Israeli settlers move in.

Land means security, a place to build a house, plant crops, harvest food, graze animals. Land means survival, wealth, bargaining power. In our part of the world we've moved so far from being a wholly farming community for our existence— even here- that we don't always recognise the value. But if you take away land you take away personhood, status, life.

For God's people, the 'Land' was a massive part of their identity.

We pick up the story today when Jeremiah spoke, in a time when the promised land was being lost and people were heading for an exile from the place they'd begun to think of as their own. *'in this place, desolate and without men or animals'* (v.10,12) No animals, no food, people dying, empty.

It's a loss of land, a loss of security, a loss of the sense of goodness, a loss of the sense of God with them. In Jerusalem houses and palaces had been torn down and there was great wickedness (33:4) There was no king, no proper rule, no celebration of life. This was disaster.

Thousands of Zimbabwe's white farmers must decide by midnight tonight whether to fight President Robert Mugabe's government and risk jail or to flee lands they have farmed for generations.

Bringing his programme to reclaim land occupied by white settlers up to 112 years ago to a crescendo, Mugabe has given nearly 3,000 of the country's 4,500 white farmers a Thursday deadline to hand over their land for occupation by blacks. (Daily Mail - 28th Nov)

BUT – and it's a big 'but' – says God to Jeremiah *'Nevertheless I will bring health and healing....I will let them enjoy abundant peace and security..I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity....rebuild, cleanse wickedness'* (v.6-8)

Then we hear the city will bring God joy, praise and honour (v. 9) there will be sounds of joy and celebrations of thanks and marriage will happen (v.11) and the land? There will again be pastures for the flocks (v.13) There will be right and good king growing out from the stump that's left after everything has been cut down. *'I will bring a righteous branch from David's line....'* (v.15) (That was fulfilled when Jesus came – the one truly Righteous king and priest). (v.18) and though people think God has abandoned them, it's not true: *'if day and night end, then I will reject these people. I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them.* (v.26)

Just in case we think 'It's alright for Jeremiah to say these things....' we need to know he was in prison when he wrote these words and he had put his own faith in God's restoration a while earlier by buying the deeds of a field. That's not the mark of a man who thinks the end is nigh.

Land restored, good rule, celebration to come. What a hope to hold onto for those people. It happened.

So let's move on hundreds of years to where Jesus was speaking. Can the people be assured now that the land they've claimed back and built their temple on will be their security for ever? No! It's all going to happen again.

In AD70 there was an invasion once more and the Temple was destroyed. Yet Jesus wasn't even just talking about this event when he gave this grim prediction. *There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars....anguish and perplexity (Lk 21:25-26)* This is about something catastrophic – the end of times. Yet, just as with Jeremiah, in the midst of the horror of it all there's hope: *when these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near' (v.28)*

There is no point holding on tightly to what we have as if it will always be there. Many of us are used to being able to plan and arrange things for the future but sometimes it just doesn't happen. Things surprise us. Terrorist attacks surprise us. Where possible, we are meant to be ready but often we're not because we don't really expect it to happen to us....illness, death, attack, burglary.

The fact is that the Promised Land hasn't been reached yet. There are still going to be difficulties along the way but lift your heads.... Eden is only finally restored in heaven but thanks to God, there's a route to take to get there if we keep trusting and keep walking along with him. Look up, lift your heads. *Heaven and earth may well pass away but God's promises won't (v.33)*

That Land is ahead- a home, a place of security, peace, closeness with God, reconciliation, togetherness, freedom. We look ahead to the coming of Jesus' birthday, to the coming of the Lord again, to the coming to a Promised Land of heaven.

So how should we live?

- In a very practical sense, we need to be aware of those whose land is precious: to campaign against projects which destroy the land needed for farming especially amongst the poor
- we need to hold lightly to what seems to be ours because it may not last as long as we think. We too may be taken by surprise one day.

- We need to keep on hoping for restoration, for our Promised Land '*a new heaven and a new earth....(and the) dwelling of God is with people*

'Dear God, this earth is fragile. It crumbles in my fingers, erodes under my boots' tread; but I walk over it, depend on it, live by it, look at the scenes it creates for me in the woods and mountain views. It is mine to care for. I am connected to it. 'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust' – it will be me one day and then what?

Help us to go on walking the earth in gentleness, reverence, trust, thankfulness. We, too, are fragile but one day our Land and Lives will be restored.