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Epiphany 4C

Sermon notes on Jeremiah 1.4-10

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"The apostle versus the genius"

When you go for a job interview, the task at hand is to impress on the boss that you are the one for the job. If you don't tell them how good you are, no one else will!

Now, allow for a moment that the conversation we've just heard between God and the soon-to-be prophet Jeremiah is a job interview. God says – here's a task I have for you! Jeremiah says – Ah God, look, thanks heaps, but I'm really not a very good speaker, and I'm still only a kid; to put it bluntly, I'm not your man. And we would expect the average employer to say here – Thanks for your honesty! We'll see if we can find someone else...

Now, of course, that's not what happens for Jeremiah. Jeremiah objects that he's only a child and that he can't speak very well. Such a response is common among the Old Testament prophets,<sup>1</sup> but *why* do they object in this way? For Jeremiah, the obvious reason would seem to be that he *was* young, and also not a very good speaker! Both those things might be true, but the most important reason for his hesitation is that it is just the way he *should* have responded. For the sign of a prophet of God is not a matter of experience or eloquence, rather simply the willingness to tend the task for which God will provide. While Jeremiah does have to get out there and do the stuff, nevertheless it can only be effective if *God* is present in that work.

And it's not that God gives words to Jeremiah and the other prophets because these people just happen not to be very good with words. It's more that prophets' preaching would be useless unless they were *God's* words being spoken.<sup>2</sup> A real

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<sup>1</sup> When God approaches Moses, Moses insists that he can't do the job because he is a poor speaker. As we'll hear next week, Isaiah objects that he is unclean. Gideon objects to God that he is the least member of a family which comes from the weakest tribe of Israel.

<sup>2</sup> When I was in my first year university computer science classes, we were told that the lecturers preferred it if we had had *no* experience in computer programming, rather than having picked a bit up from high school or our own attempts at home. A problem the teaching staff had discovered was that students who had taught themselves, or

problem might have arisen if Jeremiah had answered God – "Yes, I think I *could* do that! Actually, I think I could be quite *good* at it!" A prophet whose message's effectiveness rests on how he or she *sells it* or on his or her natural abilities and inclinations is not God's prophet, even if the message itself is what God would speak.

Of course, we all have abilities for this or that task, and we should make the most of them!<sup>3</sup> But those who are called to work with God have to make the sort of response which Jeremiah makes, because God asks the impossible – or what is impossible to achieve without God's help. God doesn't say to Jeremiah, "Do what you can" but "I have put *my* words in *your* mouth; speak what I command you." And the very moment at which God sets Jeremiah apart for this ministry emphasizes this: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations..." (v5). God chooses Jeremiah for this task before his birth *not* because God knows everything and so knows that Jeremiah will grow up to be good prophet material, but because it's largely *irrelevant* what Jeremiah grows up to be like. In fact, Jeremiah was not a happy prophet – or happy to be a prophet. He hated the way he was treated because of what he proclaimed,

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been badly taught, had picked up bad programming habits which had to be unlearned. The same thing happened when I got the theological college – I discovered that the word "God", and most of the other words the church uses, didn't actually mean in Christian confession what I thought they meant. I had picked up all sorts of understanding and meanings from around the place, and so there was required a long period of *unlearning* before I began to be able to think about the questions I and others had in a more profoundly *Christian* way. In both cases, what I *thought* I was good at actually turned out to be a problem when it came to digging deeper and learning more.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah himself used all sorts of clever images and metaphors to make his point, and perhaps it was because he had a particularly vivid imagination that the images came to him. Seized by God, his gifts come under God's service.

hated that his proclamation concerned the destruction of the people he loved, and was even moved to the point of accusing God of deceiving him and overpowering him so that he *must* preach. This is not your ideal employee!

The simple point is just that the work of those whom God calls is *God's* work when it involves speaking the "Word" of God and not merely our words in the powers we have in ourselves. It involves what Kierkegaard called the difference between the genius and the apostle (or, here, the genius and the prophet). The genius is one whose special abilities allow him or her to do extraordinary things by themselves. The apostle, or the prophet, is one who acts not out of an internal drive or abilities but out of a *call* to act. What is said or done comes not from within but from without – from God.

The pressing question then becomes, how we know that this or that is being done in God's power, how we can measure it? The answer is that we *can't* know or measure it in any *absolute* way. If a dead man on a cross can, totally unexpectedly, become the name and meaning of the world, then most of the things we use to measure will fail us in this task.

The attitude we are to take in the things we propose to say and do is that of Jeremiah: "I am only a child, I don't know all things." But this is actually a very *difficult* thing to say sincerely, because we like to think that we've "grown up"! Children aspire to being grown ups, or at least being able to do what the bigger kids do, and the bigger kids look forward to being able to drive, or work, or whatever. But the problem with being "grown" up is that grown ups are supposed to know everything. *Not* to know something which adults are supposed to know, or failing in something which an adult ought to be capable of, can be a source of great embarrassment.

Of course, there *is* a place and need for learning, and growing, and for at least making *different* mistakes as we mature! But we need also to know and remember what Jeremiah knew in his response to God's calling: whatever age we're at, we are children before God. Ours is a God who, when he creates, creates out of "nothing". And so, when God creates with us, he does not "add" to what we have or are capable of, but takes us and makes what we are into *something quite different*. If we *knew* that we could do the task we believe God has set before us because we consider ourselves strong or smart or resourceful or whatever, then we would have no reason to believe that what we might achieve will be the work of God. If *this* God is working through us, he'll take what we have done and do something surprisingly different with it. The danger is that we take an action or statement *of ours* and

attach to it the words "God did" or "God said." We almost have to allow that God will make use of what we have done, *in spite* of our having done it! We can say that this or that is *our* will, that we hope that it will be God's and then pray that God will use our words and actions to his glory and as testimony to his coming kingdom.

Jeremiah is presented to us not as a person who is hesitant to do God's work, but as one who knows what it would mean for his actions to be *God's* actions. For us to do as Jeremiah did is not to be "brave" – although there's a bit of that required too! The call is more to be *humble* in the tasks that have been given us as his people. All that we do or say, must be done and said in such a way that the power which is active is allowed to be God's power, and not our own. What will impress, *in the way which matters*, is when *God's* word – the good news about Jesus Christ – is heard with the peace and healing it brings. Like any other organization the church and its people are susceptible to mistaking its own gifts and abilities as the means to its security and future. But it's only when we allow that God must take the lead that the kingdoms we try to build *might*, surprisingly and only by the grace of God, be found also to be God's kingdom.

By the grace of God may we hear and embrace our calling – as individuals and as a community – and respond with obedience to speak and act as *God* calls, to the benefit of all God's people and to God's greater glory. Amen.