

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Services on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2010

### Jeremiah 29:1-14 - "Votewise!"

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This is the third and final sermon in our mini series "Votewise!" Today we're looking from Jeremiah 29 at how God wants us to live as citizens in our increasingly secular and godless society. It's important to say from the outset that our situation is different in many ways from the original readers of Jeremiah's letter. The people of Judah were in Babylon because of their sin – their captivity in the city was God's judgement for the way that time and again they had turned their back on God. The Babylonians who were the super-power of the time had come to Jerusalem and taken the people captive back to Babylon in the mid-580s BC. There are clear and obvious differences between them and us but there similarities too. We too are the people of God. We too are exiles; not quite in the same way as them but we are exiles.

At the 6pm service this term we've been studying Philippians and Paul says in 3:20 "**But our citizenship is in heaven**". Yes, we're citizens of Britain but our primary citizenship is in heaven – that's our true home. That's why the apostle Peter in his first epistle describes the people he's writing to as "**aliens and strangers in the world**". So like God's people in Jeremiah 29 we're aliens and strangers in our society – our true home is somewhere else and that's where we long to be. Also, like them the culture in which we live is quite diverse – made up of a whole load of different people groups with different world views. And it's opposed to God. In fact Babylon throughout Scripture is symbolic of the world / of society in hostile opposition to God. So there are all these similarities and the question for them and the question for us is how do we live in a society that is hostile to God and his ways? How do you do that? And the answer of God through Jeremiah is astounding. 3 ways we should relate to our society. The wrong way to relate to society, the right way to relate to society and how to get the power to do it. The wrong way, the right way and how to get the power to do it.

First - **The wrong way to relate to our society**. There were 2 groups of people who had views on how the Israelites should respond to their exile in Babylon. And God in this letter rejects both of them. The first agenda is the agenda of the Babylonians themselves. The Babylonians had learned, they were geniuses at how to deal with unruly nations. What was their genius solution? It wasn't to drive them out. It wasn't to enslave them – their brilliant solution was to assimilate them. With assimilation you say: "Oh you can live with us and you can have all the best jobs...as long as you become just like us." We see this in the Book of Daniel which we're going to be studying next term – Daniel and his mates were educated and treated well but the intention was to assimilate them. So Daniel was given a new name – Beltshazzar which means "My God is Bel" one of the Babylonians false gods. The goal – the agenda was to assimilate them – intellectually, socially, culturally and spiritually so that that community gradually loses its ability to have its own distinctive interpretation and understanding of the world. And within a couple of generations they are gone. They want the top jobs, the money, the power and in order to get it you have to become culturally, intellectually, socially and spiritually like the Babylonians.

Can you see how this is such a live issue for us? Government in this country has got so big that increasingly it is pushing its own secular humanist non-Christian morality upon us in all areas of life. In the statute books sin is being sanctified more and more. The weakest and frailest – the unborn and the elderly in society are not being protected. Family life as understood from a Christian worldview is being undermined at an alarming rate. The new Children, Schools and Families Bill drives liberal values into sex education and centralises control in Whitehall. It also proposes excessive regulation of parents who opt to educate their children at home. In a similar vein how about the morning-after-pill - when it was first approved for use in the UK it was for “exceptional circumstances” – and available only with a prescription from a doctor. Today that pill is freely available over the counter in pharmacies and online. Or take the Equality Bill – it sounds great doesn't it – we believe in equality but the Bill is very likely to infringe on our Christian liberty in several ways. Due to legislation passed in the late 90s hardcore pornography is now available in newsagents and petrol stations. There's also been a massive increase in the amount of casinos and betting shops – why? How's this come about? Again - Government legislation. Under this government it's becoming much harder to be a Bible-believing Christian – increasingly we're labelled as homophobic and fundamentalists. Some are not allowed to wear a cross as jewellery at work or to offer to pray with people in real need. Others are being prevented from serving on adoption panels or from being civil registrars if they do not sign up to the latest equality legislation. And the danger is that, in the same way as the Babylonians sought to assimilate God's people so we too are being assimilated if we're not very careful. For us too the temptation will be to go for the easy option and compromise our faith as our government and the media and society at large seeks to impose its non-Christian secular humanist morality and worldview onto us. We desperately need to hear the voice of God in this dangerous situation. What does God say to us in this situation. He says end of v6 **“Increase in number there; do not decrease.”** Remain distinctive in other words. Stand firm against the tide of secularism like Daniel did. And on May 6<sup>th</sup> we have an opportunity to influence the way this country is governed. The onus is on us to find out about the policies and agendas of the different parties and the different MPs. The Christian Institute has a helpful link on its website where you can see how your MP has voted on moral issues. It'd be worth researching that sort of thing. It'd be worth investigating how much or little the different parties value the institution of marriage, the sanctity of life, religious freedom and all these other key areas.

So the first wrong way to relate to society is by succumbing to assimilation. Increase says God – don't decrease. Remain distinctive and we can help ourselves in this by doing our research and being wise in who we vote for.

The second wrong way to relate to society is by tribalism. The Jewish prophets besides Jeremiah had an agenda as well. They were making prophecies and telling the people of God how to live in exile and God says v8: **“Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.** What had these prophets been saying? In chapter 28 they had said how God would break the yoke of Babylon and that within 2 years the exile would be over. And it's our job to do what? To stay out here on the Kebar canal where we have settled in our little ethnic enclave and let's deal with the city so that we exploit it and grow our own tribe. Tribalism you see despises the society and it only deals with it to exploit it and make my family, my tribe more powerful.

God says no to assimilation and he says no to tribalism. Instead he tells them 2<sup>nd</sup> main point - **the right way to relate to society** He tells them something that must have been astounding for the exiles to hear. He says v5 ***“Build homes – move in, go right into that city and settle there, raise your families, plant gardens. Increase in number there; do not decrease.”*** Also v7 ***‘seek the peace and prosperity of the city’***...of Babylon – that wicked city where the hands of the leaders are dripping with blood. It was a city flooded with idols and yet God has the audacity to say seek the peace of the place. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.. That’s very similar to what Paul says in our first reading from 1 Timothy 2, where he writes: ***“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”*** First and foremost we’re to pray for MPs and ministers. The greatest good we can do for this nation is to pray for it – not least that the gospel may continue to have freedom to go forth. We’re to pray. How else are we to seek the peace and prosperity of our society? A key way must be by being distinctive from the world around us. The world goes to the city, goes to society to get recognition, to make a name for oneself, to find achievement, needing to get so that I can feel good about myself and get an identity. We need to get up the ladder and if that means we’re exhausted because we’re working so hard or we exploit others because they get in the way then so be it. In stark contrast as Christians we’re to be motivated to work not on the principle of pride but of peace, not on the basis of human effort but on God’s grace. Christians know who we are in Christ; we have received so richly from God; we know his mercy and his love, our identity and security is in Christ so we don’t come to society looking to get but to give. The world works on this principle: “Your life to benefit me” I go to society to get but for the believer that is reversed: “It’s my life to benefit you”- I go to society to serve. “Seek the peace and prosperity of the city” says the Lord. Seek the good of Little Shelford, of Stapleford, of Cambridge of our neighbourhood of society in general. Care for your community, your colleagues, your neighbours and seek to bless them. As Jesus says in Matthew 5:14 which Simon has already referred to in this series: ***“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven.”*** I think that Tots, Coffee at All Saints, the helping hand initiative if we can get that up and running are excellent and exciting ways to live this out. On the smaller scale it’s great that so many folk at church are involved with their communities here in LS or elsewhere by being on the village council or involved with clubs or sports teams, scouts, Brownies – seeking to bless and prosper and serve society. This should go hand in hand with our outreach – our evangelism because the primary way to bless and love our neighbours is by sharing the gospel with them. So God says don’t lose your identity don’t be assimilated but use your identity in Christ to serve society and bless it.

The early Christians are a model to us in this. Rodney Stark is a historian and sociologist who wrote a book called “The Rise of Christianity” in which he describes the cities in the Graeco-Roman Empire when there were all these plagues going through. So appalling were these plagues that people dared not treat the diseased for fear of catching the dreaded illness - even family members were kicked out onto the streets. Now if you live with the assimilation model or the tribal model you get out of the city at that point. You flee; You don’t want to die.

But it's a documented fact that most Christians during the plagues showed - I quote from an eye-witness: "unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another, heedless of danger they took charge of the sick tending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ. And many departed this earthly life serenely happy – for they were infected by their neighbours but they cheerfully accepted their pains. Many lost their lives in this matter." And then Rodney Stark comments: "When the cities were falling apart Christians stayed and took care of people even at the cost of their own lives. Most people who survived only survived because Christians took care of them. The consequences of all this was that pagan survivors faced greatly increased odds of conversion because of their greatly increased attachment to Christians. As a result the gospel spread rapidly and by 300AD most of the cities had become Christian. The mark of the Christian should be that they are the very best citizens of all. How can this be? That brings us to our third and final heading:

### **The power to relate to our society in the right way**

How are we every going to be able to serve our communities like this? Centuries after the exiles in Babylon read Jeremiah's letter Jesus Christ came into a city. In fact today on Palm Sunday we remember that entrance, and yet as we share Holy Communion we remember too that Jesus didn't stay in that city for long. As we eat the bread and drink the wine we recall how he was thrown out of the city, he was exiled from society and executed on a hill called Calvary outside the city. You never executed somebody inside the city, it was always outside because it was symbolic of the exile that sin deserves – cut off from God and from all good things including society, you were exiled, you were thrown out. Hebrews 13:12 says **"And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his blood."** Jesus suffered outside the city gate – what does that mean? On the Cross Jesus was forsaken, he was cosmically thrown out. He was exiled from the City of God so that you and I through faith in Jesus can be brought in. When you trust in Jesus you automatically become a citizen of heaven. Jesus lost the city that was so that we could become citizens of the city which is to come and that makes us salt and light in the city that is – in our communities now. How come? Because knowing how much we are loved and adored by God in Christ we're empowered to love our neighbours and care for them. Knowing our security and identity in Christ we don't come to society looking for what we can get from it but looking for what we can give to it. Knowing forgiveness for all our sin and guilt and shame we are empowered to forgive and love others even when they are horrible and unlovely towards us. Knowing that our true home is in the city that is to come, in glory with Christ then we're content to put up with hardship now; we're not too fussed if life doesn't work out as we'd planned and dreamed of – we don't get that perfect job or fulfil all our ambitions. It doesn't matter because Ephesians 1:3 **'we have been blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.'** Knowing this liberates us to relate in the right way towards society now – it frees us and enables us to seek the peace and prosperity of the village, the town, the country where we are exiles.

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)