

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've just returned from a lovely holiday in England. It was a wonderful time to be surrounded by so many familiar things. Old friends, warm beer, cricket, cottage gardens, irony and proper bacon, and of course, understatement. I had to recalibrate my brain to the fact that English people like to talk in understated terms, which actually coming from America takes quite a while to recalibrate.

We actually have a parishioner in London at the moment who sometimes comes to this service who I'm slightly worried about because she might I fear be suffering, be a victim of that peculiarly English trait. She called me up just before I left to go to England and said, "Oh, we're staying in London when you're over there, and we're right near your old parish in Notting Hill. Have you got any suggestions as to where we might go?" So we talked for a bit and then she said, "Oh, and when we're there, the person who we've borrowed the house from has said that there's some kind of street fair going on in Notting Hill."

I said, "When are you there?" She said, "The end of August." I said, "That's no street fair. Don't be thinking maypole dancing and face painting. That's the Notting Hill Carnival. It's the biggest festival in the Western world and over one and a half million people come to party on the streets of Notting Hill and to make life a complete misery for everyone who lives there, which is why anyone who lives there plans to go away during the festival." The local businesses batten down the hatches as if there was a hurricane coming. They board up all the shops. The police are out in force because there's enormous amounts of illegal substances consumed by many of the million and a half people who come. To call it a street fair is an understatement of the highest order. But that's how the English like to communicate with each other.

I think it's fair to say that the prophet Jeremiah, who we've just heard from, was not an Englishman. The prophet Jeremiah, whose first sermon we're looking at today does not have an understated bone in his body. He was happy telling it how it is. He spoke in a fearless, uncompromising way, which meant he was a faithful though thoroughly unpopular prophet. If you were here last week, you'll know we're starting a short series on this book of Jeremiah who's coming up now in our Old

Testament readings from the lectionary over the next few weeks, and Rebecca kicked us off last week talking about the first chapter of Jeremiah where he first appears as a young man. His initial response to God's call to him to be a prophet was rather diffident. "I don't know how to speak," he said, "I'm only a boy."

But that diffidence soon went. He soon found his voice, and the passage that we've heard set for today from Jeremiah two is the first of the 13 sermons of his that are recorded in the book, and it's a sermon which sets the tone for his ministry. It's uncompromising stuff. "Be appalled, be shocked, be utterly desolate," he says, which is typical Jeremiah. No compromise, no mincing of words, only straight talking, shooting from the hip.

Jeremiah lived at a time when the people of Israel needed things to be spelled out clearly. They were in the last chance saloon. They'd ignored the great line of prophets that had been sent to them, particularly Hosea and Amos, who'd come before. Now they were teetering on the edge of religious and political disaster. Jeremiah's central message is that the people had wandered away from God, the God who led them through the wilderness into a plentiful land where they'd enjoyed lots of good things. They'd simply forgotten God and wandered away. The people didn't say, "Where is the Lord?" The priests didn't say, "Where is the Lord?" None of the Israelites were saying, "Where is the Lord?" Because they were happy getting along without him. They'd moved on in their spiritual life. As it says at the beginning of the reading, the people went after worthless things and became worthless themselves.

"They went after things that do not profit," Jeremiah says, and at the end of the reading, he comes up with a wonderful image to describe their situation. "The people have forgotten me," God says, "The fountain of living water and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water." They'd given up the beauty of knowing and worshiping the God who'd brought them out of Egypt, to the pale imitation of Baal worship.

"My people have changed their glory to something that does not profit." It wasn't that the people had stopped being religious. They'd simply come up with an inferior, worthless religious alternative. As G.K. Chesterton said, "When people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing. They believe in anything." The people of

Israel had rejected the true God who was called the spring of living water and relied on their own efforts to satisfy the deep longings of their lives. The prophet had said they dug their own cisterns rather than drawing on the spring of living water. They had tried to find satisfaction in various sins and futile attempts to fulfill their lives, but their attempts were like trying to fill broken cisterns.

Whatever they did accumulate became stagnant and they were not able to hold onto much of what they had found. They were constantly running after life, but it was running through their fingers. They were trying to accumulate things, but nothing of real value. There was a stench and an emptiness inside, but they were unwilling to turn to the true God whose supply of life was endless and effervescent. They were not sure they could trust the law to satisfy their thirst. Put like that we might think that Jeremiah's message to the people of Israel is as relevant to us as it was to its first hearers. We're still faced with the puzzle of why so many people live so badly. It's not so much, especially in La Jolla, that people live wickedly or cruelly. They simply live inanelly.

Jeremiah's image is developed in the new Testament. Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. I'll provide streams of living water." Imagine we'd spent our vacation walking on the John Muir trails. It was a hot afternoon. We come to the end of the trail at the end of the day and we find there much to our joy a huge refrigerator with a glass door filled with bottles of Crystal Springs water. Nicely chilled. The sign says, "Free water. Help yourself." What a joy that is when we're thirsty. It would be to go over to the cooler and help ourselves to some of that cool, refreshing water. As we're there satisfying our thirst with this cool, clear, free water, you notice someone else finishing the trail who looks even more tired and thirsty than we are.

You just know that he can't wait to quench and assuage his thirst. But to our surprise, he kneels at a small fishpond at the end of the trail. It's a fishpond we'd noticed as we'd walked past it, with lily pads, a few frogs, filled with algae and stagnant murky water. But this man has his face down in the fishpond drinking the water. You just can't believe it. We say to the man, "There's some Crystal Springs water over there in the fridge. Why are you drinking the fishpond?" He says to you, "Well, I saw the cooler but this fishpond is closer, more convenient, and I was thirsty."

What would we think about this guy? Would we think he was crazy drinking out of the fishpond when he could have had clear, cool Crystal water? Sadly, many of us do drink out of the fishpond. I heard someone this week when I was back home, an old friend, describe how they felt that the first half of their life was all about accumulating all the things they'd ever wanted. Family, career, nice house, but the words he used to describe how he felt at the moment was hollow. He said, "All of this seems to me to have just left me a bit hollow." They were left thinking what's the point of the second half of my life?

The pilot who told his friend in the cockpit as he flew over his old home, he said, "You see that river down there? When I was a boy, I used to fish in that river, look up at the planes that went overhead, and thought one day I'll want to be at the front of one of those planes." Now he said, "I look down at the river and I think I wish I was fishing in that river." We can dig our own cisterns, but they won't provide the water that satisfies.

Jesus is the source of that which will quench our spiritual thirst. Only the living water that He provides can quench the spiritual thirst in each one of us. He is the promised spring of living water. No other source will satisfy. The temptation for us today, just as it was in the people of Jeremiah's time, is to dig our own cisterns in an attempt to satisfy our thirst and desires, but that's simply drinking in the fishpond when the spring is close by.

Let me leave you with as final words the words of an Englishman who knew the danger of understatement. CS Lewis said, "The only thing Christianity cannot be is moderately important. It's everything or nothing." So let's listen to the booming voice of Jeremiah speaking to us across the centuries, and let us leave our cisterns alone and seek only Jesus, the source of living spring, spiritual water. Amen.