

What keeps us going? – Brian Griffiths

Those who run marathons will often talk about ‘hitting the wall’. This normally happens around mile 20 or 21 and runners experience a sudden lack of energy. Their pace slows and the legs feel like lead. Mentally they feel self doubt – can they ever reach the finish – only 5 or 6 miles away? But, something keeps them going – they find reserves of energy from somewhere and it’s almost as if they will themselves across the finish line.

In our Old Testament reading today it seems as if Jeremiah has ‘hit the wall’. His prophecies are having no effect and everyone seems to be turning against him. Who was Jeremiah? Like many prophets in the Old Testament, Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet. Jeremiah never learned to like his role. He remained reluctant, insecure, and often unhappy. God chose him to be "over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant". To accomplish that, Jeremiah had only one resource--his mouth. His message? With God's approval, the savage Babylonians would sweep down into Judah. Clever alliances with other powers like Egypt would not help, said Jeremiah. Neither would Judah's half-hearted religion. Judah's only hope lay in turning back to the living God.

No prophet in the Bible exposes his feelings more than Jeremiah. Sometimes he’s known as ‘The Weeping Prophet’. His relationship with God was streaked with quarrels, reproaches, and outbursts. He told God he wished he were dead. He accused God of being unreliable. But God offered no sympathy. Rather, he promised more of the same, reminding Jeremiah of his promise to stand by him. Their relationship, doubts and all, forms one of the best examples in the Bible of what it means to follow God in spite of everything.

In our reading this morning, his prophecies had annoyed the chief priest of the temple. Jeremiah was threatening doom and gloom, so the priest had him beaten and put in the stocks for a day. In the stocks Jeremiah ‘hits the wall’. He is fed up standing up for God and preaching his word. Everyone is against him and he’s fed up – so he moans at God. Here’s what he says from a version of the Bible called ‘The Message’.

You pushed me into this, God, and I let you do it.

You were too much for me.

And now I’m a public joke.

They all poke fun at me.

***Every time I open my mouth
I'm shouting, "Murder!" or "Rape!"
And all I get for my God-warnings
are insults and contempt.***

However, what keeps him going 'through the wall' is this burning desire that God has put within him. He just can't stop speaking out for God – delivering God's message – however uncomfortable that may be. Here's how he describes it:

***But if I say, "Forget it! No more God-Messages from me!"
The words are fire in my belly, a burning in my bones.
I'm worn out trying to hold it in.
I can't do it any longer! Then I hear whispering behind my back:
"There goes old 'Danger-Everywhere.' Shut him up! Report him!" Old friends
watch, hoping I'll fall flat on my face:
"One misstep and we'll have him. We'll get rid of him for good!"
But God, a most fierce warrior, is at my side. Those who are after me will be
sent sprawling — Slapstick buffoons falling all over themselves, a spectacle of
humiliation no one will ever forget.
Oh, God-of-the-Angel-Armies, no one fools you. You see through everyone,
everything. I want to see you pay them back for what they've done. I rest my
case with you.
Sing to God! All praise to God!
He saves the weak from the grip of the wicked.***

You might recognise Jeremiah's words as a lament, and in typical lament format he turns to praise God in the end.

Jeremiah has found that it's not easy standing up for God – it's not easy speaking God's message for his nation and the world. But his deep passion for God is the fire in his belly that keeps him going despite all the difficulties. What is that that fires you and me up?

For me, when I see bullying it sends my anger off the scale – especially when I see it in the church – when I see ordained and lay ministers abuse their ministry to dominate and treat vulnerable Christians really badly. The Church of England is in the centre of a serious problem at the moment as far as safeguarding is concerned. Earlier in the week the Church of England Independent Safeguarding Board was sacked. It seems clear that the church

lacks accountability for safeguarding because it's become a place where bullies and abusers can hide away – where bullying and abuse is simply swept under the carpet as if it never existed. I have spoken about it in the past and I shall continue to challenge those who fail to treat others in the church with dignity and courtesy.

Let's look and see what's happening to Jeremiah fits in with our gospel. Jesus is sending the disciples out to spread the Good News in a hostile environment. He was sending them out on a dangerous mission. He warns them that they will receive the same reception that he has had – rejection, hatred, threats and suffering. But Jesus says “have no fear of those who do these things to you. Don't be afraid of those who hurt the body, but cannot hurt the soul.”

And yet we are afraid of telling our Christian story. We are uncomfortable with it. We are afraid of the consequences – that people – maybe our friends or relatives will think us odd. Or maybe they'll ridicule us. Or maybe they'll turn against us. You may think that it's relatively easy to stand up here and preach about the gospel story – that the pulpit is pretty safe because the congregation are Christians anyway so we're all singing from the same song-sheet – in fact it isn't – and sometimes the pulpit can be a very vulnerable place to be. Even a preacher can be afraid of proclaiming the Good News.

A few years ago it happened to me when I was a Reader at St. Mark in South Norwood. I got a telephone call completely out of the blue one day from Churches Together in South Norwood. Could I preach at the Good Friday Open Air Service off the back of a lorry outside Barclays Bank in the High Street? I was filled with panic – I could cope with preaching in church – but an open-air service was an entirely different situation. There would be all sorts of people passing by – what if they heckled me (I had seen this happen at the same service a few years previously) – what if my work colleagues happened to be passing by – a thousand and one reasons why I shouldn't do this sermon. So, I politely but firmly declined and told the organiser that I thought it was a job for one of the ordained clergy.

As soon as I put the phone down, I started to feel really guilty. I thought about it and wrestled with all the consequences in my mind – then I thought about it some more – and later that day I summoned up the courage to ring the organiser back and I asked if she had found anyone else to preach. (I was secretly hoping that she had!!) She hadn't, eating humble pie, I volunteered. The strange thing is that on the day itself, I felt quite strangely empowered

preaching off the back of this lorry in the High Street – I still have the sermon – it was entitled “What’s Good about Good Friday” – and I ended up wondering what I had been worrying about.

God was with me that day – he was in charge and in control – of that I am sure – no-one heckled, my work colleagues didn’t come past and in the end there was quite a crowd around the lorry. Only two things went wrong!! A lady fainted at the end of my sermon (I accept no responsibility for that – the sermon wasn’t that powerful!!) and they sang “Shine Jesus Shine” to end the service – but I have since forgiven Christians Together in South Norwood for that!!

Earlier in this reflection I talked about marathon runners ‘hitting the wall’. Some of you know, but many of you don’t know, that Rowena has yet another health issue to deal with. We have already had a visit to the colo-rectal consultant and have other appointments set up with haematology and urology. On top of which Rowena’s sister has just last week started an intensive month long course of radiotherapy after being diagnosed with cancer in the spring. As if we didn’t have enough to deal with. It feels that Rowena and I have ‘hit the wall’ and, at the moment, we find it difficult to see any light at the end of the tunnel. It is hard for me to get up here and witter on when nothing seems to make sense anymore and God seems permanently on mute. It feels like everything is spiralling out of control. I’m not sure what I believe at the moment, so it’s hard for me to preach about something that I’m no longer sure about myself.

The only thing that keeps me going at the moment, is the kindness that we have received in abundance from ordinary people in our congregations – in fact, you are not ordinary, you are extraordinary. Like Jeremiah, although I wouldn’t presume to compare myself to him, there is still some spark left in me that keeps me preaching and I can’t put my finger on it – maybe it is that undeserved kindness that you have shown to us. God seems far away and yet something is nagging at me to keep going. Something convinces me that God knows us by name, we are valued by him and despite all of life’s difficulties, God looks after us and, impossible though it may seem, we should not be afraid. One day, there will be light at the end of the tunnel for all of us here who are going through hard times at the moment..

May God who cherishes every sparrow, who goes in search of every lost lamb, who embraces every sick person, who dries every tear, and holds every

*hand, guide us, sustain us and enrich our lives; and may knowing that we are valued be our joyful song today and always.
Amen.*