

## Jeremiah 1: 4 “Before you were born” Sermon by Andrew Green on 21<sup>st</sup> August 2016

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart....”

### INTRODUCTION

Let me ask, “Do you remember anything *before you were born*?” Well, you may think, “that is a stupid question, memories only go back to the age of two or three” But, let me ask, were you told anything by your family - about, “*before you were born*” ie Were there special circumstances surrounding your birth?

My mother told me that in the 5-6 weeks before I was born she had travelled 7,000 miles by ship from Britain to India. Then days before I was born my mum & dad travelled 900 miles by rail from Bombay to Calcutta and then from Calcutta to the state of Orissa on the East coast of India. It was summer and very hot. Fellow travellers feared she would give birth on the train. But I did arrive safely in a hospital in Berhampur (Orissa) exactly 65 years ago this Tuesday

So, I was glad to be given this text from the lectionary. It made me reflect on my life. Before I was born, my mum & dad’s decision to work in India set me apart on a particular course, it shaped my story. I would be raised in India and go to boarding school in India until I was 9-10, and then I would be sent to Britain to boarding school. All this was pretty set – *before I was born*. Accordingly, it played itself out with some of the angst of parental loss - but the path was set.

What was true for me is true for us all. Where we would live (ie country & town) what family we would live in (our parents & siblings) were all set before we are born. Some of these things might turn out to be joyful or quite painful. Certainly, our sense of significance, our awareness of being loved, our purpose & meaning for life, have connections to *before we were born*.

But notice in this text, Jeremiah is told that GOD knew him before he was born. Beyond just accident of circumstance, he is told that Almighty God, knew him, set him apart & commissioned him. It’s not just that his mum & dad had plans before he was born, but GOD had plans for him.

And before we dismiss this as a personal word for a long dead prophet, let me remind you what the New Testament says of us ie “Those who God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29) “God predestined us in love to be adopted his children” (Eph 1:5). Then, Ps 139 says so much: “ You created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mothers womb. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed substance. All the days ordained for me were written in your book.”

The fact that “God knew us *before we were born*” is a truth for all of us, not just Jeremiah. What does it mean?

### 1<sup>st</sup> A word about SIGNIFICANCE

You know how lifeboats have “self-righting mechanisms”, such that even if the boat is totally capsized it will right itself. Similarly, children have weighted play-figures: however hard you knock the over they always come back to the upright position. I think we are like that! Knock us or upset us & we always centre back on our selves. We will ask, “What’s in it for me?”, “How is this going to affect me & my family...?”

But Jeremiah’s call from God - is like having that weight toward self, removed. Jeremiah finds that he has a new centre of gravity – and it is God & his master plan. If things are difficult & hard he is now going to think, “how does this fit in God’s good purpose?”

But let's be clear, Jeremiah never wanted the job, as prophet, "Sovereign Lord" (he says in v6) "I do not know how to speak, I am only a child" (He wants to weasel out of his commission). You see, Jeremiah is a sensitive soul: we can read of his tears, his depression, his desire to run away. Look at Jer 9:1 "Oh that my head were a spring of water & my eyes a fountain of tears. I would weep day & night for my people. Oh that I had in the desert place a hiding place so that I might leave my people & go away from them" ie he is saying, "God I am not suited for this (in terms of skills or emotions)I want to run. But God says, "before I formed you in the womb I knew you." In other words, God is saying "You are a significant person! Your life is no accident – rather it is at the heart of my purpose and love".

Indeed, that expression "formed you" has the hint of a potter's care & skill (a theme Jeremiah will expound in Ch 18). Jeremiah is being told – lest he complains that his calling is God's cruel joke - (He is told by God) "I formed you" – like a pot. You are hand-made & uniquely formed for the task. You are a bespoke work of art – individually crafted.

Here are words not to invite speculations about our relationship to time & eternity; or to human choice as against divine choice. No! Here are words too personal & warm. Get the message - the infinite God - cares about (finite) you!!! Isn't that wonderful!! We have significance in God's plan! Ps 139 expresses this in concrete terms: "You know when I sit down & when I rise up. You know my thoughts from afar. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely O lord." Sometimes we think, "No body understands me" – but the Psalmist says "God know your thoughts at a glance"

Is this just poetic licence? Is this sentimentality & wishful thinking? It is certainly a contrast to the way the world thinks & hopes. Ernest Hemingway said: "Life is just a dirty trick - from nothingness to nothingness". Sartre said, "Here we are all of us eating & drinking to preserve our precious existence, & yet there is nothing, nothing absolutely no reason for existing."

So, I ask again, is this word to Jeremiah just poetic licence? Is this just an Old Testament thing? God responds to our cynicism. " NO NO NO". Jesus is the proof of Jeremiah's discovery, "God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son". When we turn from our own sinful ways and turn to Christ we find a welcome and significance in God's love. If you were the only one to be saved, Jesus would have gone to the cross for you! Max Lucado, says : "If you have the Shepherd, you have grace for every sin, direction for every turn, a candle in every corner and an anchor in every storm".

Jeremiah knew he couldn't make it on his own. We know we can't make it on our own. We need an assurance that God knows about all the details of our lives. We need reassurance that life is not just a big accident. So, God says, "Before you were formed in womb I knew you..."

**2<sup>nd</sup> A word about MEANING** He has a purpose, a direction for life.

Look at verse 5. Notice the second "before" underlines God's deliberate choice v5 "*Before* I formed you in the womb I knew you, *before* you were born I set you apart". So, God's specific purpose for Jeremiah is underlined 3 times. The "I knew" is amplified by, "I consecrated" & "I appointed". The point is that God calls in order that a work may be accomplished. Our meaning in life is connected to how we serve & give of ourselves.

So God says to Jeremiah v10 (literally) "See ..I give you as a prophet to the nations.." Peterson comments: "We don't have a choice about being God's gift. If we try to live by getting, we go against the grain; against the law of gravity. Serving & giving is the meaning of our lives"

Victor Frankle was a Dr caught up in Jewish Holocaust. He survived, but wondered why some survived & some did not. With exactly the same horrific conditions, why did some overcome their hell, & others just die? He concluded “The prisoner that has lost faith in the future & has (no purpose) is doomed”. It wasn’t about how much food you had, how much medical attention. It was about hope - that life had meaning & purpose. You had something important to do & to be & to give.

Again this is a contrast to the way many in our world see existence. Carl Jung said: “The central neurosis of our time is meaninglessness. The drama of W civilization is not having anything imp to do”. But like Jeremiah we are known set apart & appointed to serve in some way.

So, Paul concludes a practical section in Colossians – addressed to husbands & wives; parents & children, masters & slaves, He says “Whatever you do (in your various roles) work at it with all your heart, for the Lord & not for men.

I love the story of Samuel Chadwick (one of great Methodist leaders of the early of 20<sup>th</sup> Cent). He was converted at a Sunday School Anniversary, where the preacher told the story of John Newton, who said that “if he was a shoe-shiner he would be the best shoe shiner in the village because he would do it for Jesus”. This made an impression on young Samuel Chadwick because it was his job at home to clean his father’s footwear. “I hated my job (he wrote later) I especially hated cleaning my father’s wellington boots. The Anniversary had been a wet day so the next day the boots were at their worst. I began with my father’s boots, on principle that the most irksome jobs are best done first. I did the job & put the boots down with a sense of relief. Then the preachers’ words about “shining boots as if they were Jesus’ boots” challenged me. I wondered if the boots would look good on Jesus? In response I took up the boots & began again. It was a simple thing to do, but I believe it was the most imp thing I ever did in my life. I got into the habit of doing the simplest things for Jesus.”

Whoever you are - whether you are a grandparent picking up and dropping off children at school, a widow being a good neighbour, a nurse doing your job, a teacher... Recognize that God has called you (appointed you & set you apart) to be a giver, a server – who can bring in God’s kingdom. When God says, “Before you were born I knew you & set you apart” ... It guarantees a life of meaning.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> A word about LOVE**

These are warm words (not speculative words) “Before you were formed in your mother’s womb I knew you...” Peterson comments, “Before Jeremiah knew God, God knew Jeremiah”. So we can say, long before we began to ask questions of God, God has been on a quest for us! Before we thought God was important – God signalled us out as important – as part of his loving purpose.

Here is an application for our worried and lonely lives: So many of us run around - searching for answers and longing for love. Freddie Mercury (of Queen) once said, “Does anyone know what we are living for?” Despite his huge fortune and his thousands of fans, he admitted in an interview how lonely he was: “You can have everything in the world & still be the loneliest man.”

But we are not lonely people! Jeremiah is told God has always known him and formed him in love.

Ps 73 is a commentary on this truth. The Psalmist begins with his envy of people for who seem to “have it all” - wealth, health, popularity . Then the Psalmist comes to his senses & says, “I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel and after you take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you & being with you I desire nothing on earth. My flesh & my heart may fail, but God is my strength & portion for ever”.

## CONCLUSION

I have used my passport a lot this year. At the back of this passport are all sorts of personal details. It says that almost exactly 65 years ago I was born in Berhampur in Orissa. The date and place are clearly documented. But who here has heard of Berhampur? Out of the 500 m that populate that great land – who would record or remember my birth?

And yet, God says to Jeremiah – and to me & to you. He knows precisely where & when we were born. He knows the pre history of our families, he knows our joys and sorrows, our triumphs and tragedies. He is not the author of our sufferings – but he knows all the details of our lives. We have significance. We have meaning. We have love – (in the words of the Psalmist) what more do you want in life?