

## **Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7**

**These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. [...]** <sup>4</sup>

**"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. <sup>6</sup> Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give our daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup> But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.**

Today's message is based on our reading from prophet Jeremiah. Yes, yes!  
Today's message comes from the Old Testament. But isn't the Old Testament only about violence, and adultery and bloodshed?

I once had a professor, Roman Catholic lady, she taught us one of Biblical languages, Aramaic. When asked why did she choose to study the Old Testament, she replied without hesitation: "Because there you have all the violence and sex and fan." There is a bit of that.

For whenever we speak truthfully about our history, and the Old Testament is all about God acting in our history before the eyes of thousands and thousands of eyewitnesses, whenever we speak about it, we can't escape mentioning neither violence nor moral depravity. That's everywhere in this world.

Our today's reading comes from prophet Jeremiah. He delivered His prophecies early in 6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ. It was the time when Babylon was the reigning superpower in Near East. Already eight centuries before Jeremiah God had foresaw that Israel will become so depraved, that He will have to wipe them out of their land. Now when this prophesy was fulfilled, Israelites found themselves in the exile in Babylon.

Why? This is the usual question we ask when something goes wrong. Has our God abandoned us? Many times God Yahweh had rescued Israel from their enemies in miraculous ways. Why not this time? Are Babylonian gods stronger than God the Creator of this Universe? What to do now?

Jeremiah wrote: “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom *I have sent* into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” Wow! What is He saying? It’s not Babylonian gods who triumphed over God Creator and Ruler of this world, no, He Himself used Babylon as a lash to punish Israelites. He Himself sent them into the exile.

Now He says: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

What is He suggesting? It was quite confusing for Israelites. They use to protect their identity by separating from others. Now God Himself is saying to blend with other nations. To seek the welfare of this city and to pray on its behalf. To seek the welfare of hostile Babylonians and to pray for them? What is this all about? They were confused.

But what does it mean for us? Is there anything God wants us to learn from Jeremiah’s message? And there is a lot, indeed. Jeremiah teaches us something that we all tend to forget.

Israel thought that they were God’s holy people, and they were. Unfortunately they failed terribly. They thought that they need to keep their holiness by separating from other nations. Especially now, when they were in Babylon.

They were the Church of the Old Testament. And that was their thinking. We, Christians, we are the Church of the New Testament. What is our thinking? Isn’t our thinking often very similar to Israelites?

We are holy people, we are the Church, let’s keep separated from this evil world. Don’t mix with them. Let’s focus only on keeping ourselves pure and clean. That was Israel’s thinking and this is so often thinking in churches today.

What can we learn from Jeremiah? God who spoke through Jeremiah spoke also to Moses when He said that all nations belong to Him. That He is God of all creation. All nations and all creation. That’s right.

Not just God of Israel or not just God of Christians. He is the Creator of this world. This is His world. And He had send Israelites, and now He has send us, Christians,

to take care of this world, to seek its welfare and to pray for it. Not just for the Church, but for the world.

But what do we do, how do we think? Let us reflect for a while. Which people do we thing do the most for God? Who are the most holy people?

Those who do something in the church. Right? Pastors or other kinds of people who deal with things of God. They are the most holy people. The most spiritual people. They do God's work, and we, others, we just do our regular earthly work.

Again, where we do something together with God? Where we are His co-workers? When we do something in the Church. For congregation. Right? Would you agree that this is very widespread understanding?

But, it is so wrong. Yes, it is so, so wrong. In every way. This is one thing we can learn from the Old Testament and from the message of Jeremiah. True God, He is God the Creator. The Creator of everything. And we are created to take care of His creation. That's our first and the most important task.

When we look how the creation of man and its purpose is described in the beginning of the Bible, we read that man was created in God's image and likeness. And commanded to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and to rule it. What does this all mean for us?

We all are created in His image. All of us, each of you. It means that we are created to be His representative on the earth, and to act like He would act. Each of us, we are so unique, our age, gifts, knowledge, skill, relationships in which God has put us. They all are unique.

There are so many things only you can do in a certain way, and no one else in the whole world. We have parents, we have children, we have siblings, relatives, friends, colleagues, employees and employers, we all are in so many relations at the same time.

And in all these relations you, yes, you are doing God's work! You are His representative. He works through you. You are in His mission, together with Him. When you use your gifts, your talents, your skills and abilities to serve these people in all these relationships, you are doing God's work.

When God promised, I'll give you your daily bread, what did He mean? Is He Himself going to visit all of us and personally do things for us. No. He uses us. We are His representatives, we do His work whenever we do something for others.

Israelites had got it wrong. They thought that they do God's work only by their worship and keeping their identity. We can say, by having their religion. But as God through Jeremiah told them, they were not there for themselves. 'Build houses, plant gardens, get married, multiply, increase, seek welfare of the place where you live, and thus you will find your welfare.'

There is one word we need to translate very carefully. We have it translated as welfare. When God created this world, when everything, according to His own evaluation, was 'very good', when everything in nature and society functioned as it was supposed to, when there was total and all-embracing prosperity, physical, emotional, social, psychological, spiritual wellbeing, this state was called in Hebrew "shalom".

This is exactly the same word that Jeremiah uses talking about our responsibilities. About what we are supposed to do. "Build houses, plant gardens, get married, multiply, increase, seek '*shalom*' of the place where you live, and thus you will find your '*shalom*'.

What does it mean for us? This is God's design for our lives, to live active lives, to strive for 'all-embracing' well-being, for 'shalom' wherever we are put by God. How do we do it? On Sundays? In the Church? No!

Building houses, planting gardens, getting married, multiplying, rejoicing. That is, living full blown lives. This is the Creator's design for us. This is our most important task. This is our first Great Commission.

We often think that what we do during the week, our work, we do it either for money, or to earn a status in community, or for self-realization, the bottom line is, we do it for ourselves. Biblical view is totally different. God uses our talents and abilities for the benefit of others. He works through us. We are His masks.

God gives us the highest possible value, for we are created to be His representatives, and we are redeemed by paying the highest possible price, the life of the Son of God.

He promises to provide for our daily bread and to give us joy when we live according to His will. When we realize it and accept it, we don't need to strive to prove something by achieving more, or earning more, then we are free to care for others.

You see, why it is so wrong to think that only in the Church we do God's work. That only those who do something in congregations can please God. Not at all.

There is only one God, and first, He is the Creator, and only then Redeemer. There is no separation between our daily lives and activities, and our life in the Church.

If we think that God worries only about us being in the Church, this kind of understanding robs us of the rich meaning and joy that our daily lives can give us. Everyone is called by God and everyone is working together with God when we undertake our daily responsibilities. Even if we don't realize it.

As spouses, as parents, as employers and employees, colleagues, friends and citizens. When you start a new day, you know that you are sent by God to take care of this world and people in it. And there are things that only you can do in your unique way.

By now you may get an impression that I'm advocating not to come to church. For we all are already doing God's work wherever we are. Not at all. Quite contrary.

We can learn from Jeremiah, what are we to do, how are we to live. But we are not born with this knowledge. We are born not just ignorant, when it comes to our understanding about who are we, and why we are here. Worse, we are born rebellious against God. We can perceive Him only as a law giver who restricts our freedom to do whatever our hearts desire. We want to care about ourselves, not about His world, not about others.

Only when God comes to us, as a man, as Jesus Christ, only when He speaks with us and reveals how deep is our rebellion, and how much God the Father loves us despite our hatred, only then we can learn what kind of God He is. God who can come and give His life for us, for you, so that we can live with Him eternally.

Only then we can start listen to what He is saying, to be open to His wisdom. That's why He has established the Church, where He comes to be with us, and to bless us. To deliver us forgiveness and restoration, to grant us good consciences

when we learn about His love and acceptance, to teach us how to live, and what is so important, to give us the Holy Spirit, who enables us to live a good life.

We can't do it on our own. Without listening to our God we can't know Him, we can't even know who we are, or His intentions for our lives, and we are definitely not able to change our wills. Without the Holy Spirit our will wills what it wills, but not what our Father has created us for.

We are created for so rich and interesting life, for so many different tasks, but unless we allow God to reveal this reality to us, to shape our minds and hearts, we can't have this joyful abundance. It is that simple.

Jeremiah told Israelites to pray for 'shalom'. That's means to be in relations with God, in conversation with God, receiving His blessings and delivering them to all people in our lives. This is our prayer today - may our Lord help us to be faithful in our tasks, to strive for the shalom of others and to find our own shalom living according His design.

Amen.