



SERMON FOR THE 10TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY, ISRAEL SUNDAY

Reading: Jeremiah 7:1-11(12-15)

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Dear fellow Christians, dear Jewish friends,

A wonderful memory is linked to my first visit to Israel. I am sitting next to a young Polish theology student in the Neshet Sherut that takes us from Lod to Jerusalem, talking enthusiastically about Jerusalem. Then, suddenly, the city comes into view and, spontaneously, we pray aloud Psalm 122: *“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’ At last our feet are standing within your gates, Jerusalem.”* In our heart was an echo of the joy with which, year after year, countless Jewish pilgrims set off on their way to the Temple in Jerusalem. The joy, yearning and wonder that the Temple roused in their hearts find expression in many of the psalms. Psalm 84 begins:

מֵהַיְדִידוֹת מִשְׁכְּנֹתֶיךָ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת:
*“How lovely is your dwelling-place, Lord of hosts!
My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord.”*

The keynote in today’s reading is very different: at God’s behest, Jeremiah refers to the thrice-repeated formula **הַיְהוָה** – *“the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord,”* as ‘lying words’ – **דְּבַר־הַשָּׁקֶר**.

By virtue of its location, Jeremiah 7:1-15 is often referred to as the Temple Speech. Jeremiah is supposed to be proclaiming the word of God to the pilgrims entering the gate of the Temple: Here he has a large audience and the location is connected to the content of his message.

The introductory verse of our reading: **הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר הָיָה אֵל-יְרֵמְיָהוּ מֵאֵת יְהוָה** – *“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord”* – makes it clear that his message is the word of God. This is how Jeremiah begins God’s exhortations to the Temple visitors: **שְׁמְעוּ דְבַר-יְהוָה** – *“hear the word of the Lord”*.

God is telling us that the alternative to the magic formula: ‘The Temple of the Lord’, with which false prophets lull people into security against the constant threat of the peoples of the North, is a shift to good deeds. Correct behaviour is referred to emphatically by reinforcing the verbs with the infinitive absolute. This translates as: *“if you thoroughly amend your ways and your actions and really deal with each other justly ...”* (Jer 7:5). To put it plainly, justice has to be manifested in our shared life, especially by helping the disadvantaged, the orphans, widows and strangers achieve justice. Connected with this social responsibility is the prohibition of worshipping strange gods.

Linked to this reminder is a promise of salvation and safety. In the Masoretic vocalised text this means: *"then will I let you live in this place"*. The German United Bible (like the New American Bible), however, translates the unvocalised text: *"then I will live with you in this place ..."* (Jer 7:7).

It is the living God alone that gives us the security of a place to stay, the security of his presence. The Temple as such does not offer protection if the people who want to take refuge there disregard God's commandments, especially as the Ark of the Covenant with the Tablets of the Law was the heart of the Temple. The most sacred is turned into a 'den of thieves', and the prayers and sacrifices become part of the lying words if, after leaving the Temple, people trample on the law once again. When God's house turns into a 'den of thieves', then all that remains for God is to move out of this house. 'Look at what happened to Shiloh', says Jeremiah at the end of his exhortations and threatening words.

The itinerant Jewish preacher Jeshua of Nazareth takes up the themes of the Temple and the right way to worship God just as the prophets had. His central message is the announcement of the kingdom of God, that God wants to live among us. *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the Gospel."* (Mark 1:15) The message of the cleansing of the Temple, referred to by all four evangelists, is unequivocal. They put into Jesus' mouth words of Isaiah (Isa 56:7) and the keyword 'den of thieves' from Jeremiah: *"My house is a house of prayer, but ye have made it a den of thieves."* (Luke 19:46). It is not only the Temple that can turn into a 'den of thieves' but especially the human heart, where God wants to pitch his tent. Jesus says: *"For from within, out of the hearts of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murder, ..."* (Mark 7:21).

Jeremiah's exhortations and the symbolic act of Jesus at the cleansing of the Temple are ultimately the message of our loving God, who invites us to repentance – *teshuvá* – and offers us the chance that his original intention can be fulfilled: *"... my joy is to be among the sons of men"* (Proverbs 8:31).

When we come together today to celebrate a Christian service and when we gathered yesterday for the Jewish Shabbat service, we have effectively followed God's invitation to be his guests, no longer as strangers but as friends. This celebration should be an occasion to thank God for the spiritually inspired new relationship between Jews and Christians that has been enhanced more and more strongly since the Second Vatican Council.

On this very day we know we are connected with our Protestant brothers and sisters who are celebrating Israel Sunday and reflecting on the close spiritual bonds between Jews and Christians and on the never-abandoned covenant between God and the Jewish people. Israel Sunday also reminds us that over the period of two millennia we have brought guilt upon ourselves by the defamation and brutal persecution of our Jewish sisters and brothers. This is why we are so grateful that more and more believing Jews, despite all the wounds of the past, devote themselves to dialogue with us Christians and can accept our faith as equally God-given.

Israel Sunday calls us to build bridges continually in daily life, to risk encounters, to learn from each other and to break down prejudices. The Jewish-Christian Bible Week is a huge milestone on this path; but we also ask ourselves: how can we pass on our experience to our congregations, to our base communities?

Jeremiah's exhortations invite Jews as well as Christians to stand strong for social justice. Today's world needs our commitment to the disadvantaged and the outcasts of the earth as much as our testimony to the one God. Thus – in a world that is so often God-forsaken – we build a spiritual Temple, a sacred space in which God's presence and his merciful love shine forth.

In mutual respect and appreciation, and in our common service for a better world, we are not so much givers as receivers of gifts. This is the point at which the Psalm verse, cited by Benedict of Nursia as a rule for the reception of pilgrims and strangers, also applies to us: *"We have thought of thy loving kindness, O God, in the midst of thy temple."* (Ps 48:9)

Translation: Nina Brink