

Are we welfare workers?

Sermon – Jeremiah 29:1-7; 1 Peter 2:9-12

Why are we here as a church?

Are we just waiting around for Jesus to return?

What is the point of your secular work?

Should you buy a house if you're really waiting for heaven?

Should we help homeless people or spend more money on Bibles for the persecuted? Should we raise money for Cancer research? Should we spend money on church buildings or should we send more money to people in Burma and China?

*** What are we doing here?**

Why do we exist as a church in this community? What is our place in Waitara?

That's what we're looking at this week.

WE ARE SOJOURNERS – WE SHOULD SEEK THE WELFARE OF THE CITY

So let's start at Jeremiah 29:1-7. (See handouts – readings on back)

* It's 597 BC. God's people were captive in Babylon. Jerusalem, God's city, had been destroyed, along with the temple. God's people were now "exiles", foreigners, sojourners, refugees, in a foreign land. Yet there were false prophets at the time that were telling everyone that they would return to their land very, very soon.

But God was saying: No. You're going to be here for a while. 70 years in fact. Time for these generations to die out. So while you're there, living in that land as exiles, as foreigners, do this: Build houses. Live in them. Get married. Give your children in marriage. Settle down. Plant crops. In other words, LIVE!

And then, verse 7. In your handouts, I've given you this reading from the CEV translation, which I think is more helpful and accurate for this passage:

"7 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."

They're instructed not to live separately from the people in this city. But to live **among them**. To live as **part** of the community. And to seek the welfare of the city.

Yes, they are God's people. Yes, they are to worship him alone. Yes they are set apart for Him. But they are to live as part of this community. And God promises a great day of return from exile – a return to the promised land. But not for a while.

Do you see the relevance of this for us today? As we live here in Waitara, or Hornsby or Mt Colah or Wahroonga, or wherever you live, we are sojourners. Exiles. Temporary residents. Where is ***our*** permanent home? Heaven. Heaven is our promised land. And when Jesus returns, he's going to bring us to our heavenly home. That will happen any day now. So what do **we** do while **we** wait in this temporary place?

WE ARE STILL SOJOURNERS – WE SHOULD STILL DO 'GOOD'.

Well, the passage we read from 1 Peter 2 actually gives us the same directive as Jeremiah 29. 1 Peter 2 tells us that we are still sojourners, still exiles, and we should still seek the welfare of the city – or in Peter's words, we should do 'good' in our community. From verse 11:

"11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

We are aliens, strangers, refugees in this community. This is not our home. YET, we are to live in this community. And we are to do good things. WHY? So people might glorify God because of our lives. So, are we doing this as a church? What happens here that is good? A few examples:

- * We raise money for **Bibles for the persecuted**.
- * We send money to **missionaries in Kenya, Jordan, Darwin, Nepal, and Asquith**.
- * There's a **Kid's Club, a kiddies corner playgroup, ESL, men's breakfasts, women's craft, senior's events, Narcotics Anonymous, holiday club** – all things which meet needs in our community.
- * And now we have a **building project** because we want to provide better facilities not JUST for our church meetings, but for over 300 people of Waitara that meet here every week.

All good things to do as a church. And we do them simply because God calls us to seek the welfare of our city. God calls us to do good, so that people might one day praise God.

But... is it wrong to spend money on church buildings when people are homeless? No! But it's wrong to spend money on buildings and *ignore* the homeless. There's nothing wrong with doing both. So do we support Anglicare who help the homeless? Is the tin bin full each week like our kitchen cupboards at home? Because I think it would be a problem if our building fund is going up, but our tin bin is empty? Or if we put on more staff at church but don't support our missionaries as well. Or if we make our own houses more comfortable, but can't support the building work here that over 300 people a week use.

Do we seek good things for Waitara? There's always that one argument: "We can't do everything!" "We can't help everyone!" "We can only give so much." I can't support Cancer research one week and send out Bibles the next week. We can't do everything.

True. We can't do everything. But can we do more? I think we can – by talking more about 3 of the taboo subjects for many churches:

* **Politics, sex, and money.**

What drives our society more than politics, sex and money? If we care about our city, I think we need to talk more, from God's word, about these areas. And so today, I want to talk on one in particular.

I'm going to talk about the last one in relation to Jeremiah and 1 Peter. And I'll start with this question: **Why is money such a private area for us to talk about?**

Perhaps because the Bible says giving should be done privately. For example – Matthew 6:4. Why? So we won't show off. Some people like to show off with their giving.

So why do we announce how much we give to charities as a church? Is that boasting? Why do we announce how much we raise at fundraisers? **To encourage one another in generosity.** Giving is not always private in the Bible. Jesus took the example of the widow who gave two small copper coins – all she had – and he made it public **to teach people about giving**. I think we've taken our secret money giving to a whole new level of secrecy. Perhaps we keep it secret *not* because we don't want to boast, but because we're *embarrassed* by it.

I want to suggest there are biblical reasons to talk more openly about money – especially when it comes to church leadership.

Here's the model I want us to take from the Bible – those in leadership should lead by example. That's a principle we use for every other part of church ministry. In 1 Chronicles 29, King David empties his personal treasury for the building of God's temple, and every donation he gives is publicly noted down. 100 tonnes of gold, 240 tonnes of silver, and so on.

* He does it to show his **personal commitment** to the building of God's temple, to **lead by example**, to **encourage generosity** and to **teach the people** of Israel how to give generously. After he does that, we read in verse 6: *"Then the leaders of families, the officers of the tribes of Israel, the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, and the officials in charge of the king's work gave willingly."*

David set the example.

So let me speak as a leader, to our leaders:

First, parents need to lead by example. Talk to your children about money. Be open about your giving to teach them and encourage them. You are their prime role models. If you don't give generously, it's unlikely they will. Husbands, lead your family in this – talk openly about it and make sure your family knows your **Biblical** view on this.

And don't just teach percentage giving. Teach real amounts. Why? Take this example:

* In the Old Testament, God's people were obligated to tithe – that is, to give 10%. They were then asked to give **more** as **free will offerings**. If we just teach to give 10%, imagine this: One Christian earns only \$10,000 a year and gives \$1000 a year. Another Christian earns \$200,000 a year and gives \$20,000 a year. So one Christian takes home \$9000, the other takes home \$180,000. That's not a good model for generosity. Parents, teach your children about generosity with real numbers.

Second, Home group leaders – make sure you don't avoid this topic – bring it up at least several times a year in Bible studies, because it's one we all struggle with at times.

And finally, to all other church leaders – Preachers, Parish Councillors, Wardens, youth group leaders - think seriously how **you** give, and be prepared to give an answer to those you lead – and be prepared to lead discussions on it.

I'm going to take the first step. I want to lead in this area by example. I want us to break our silence. I am going to tell you how much I earn, and how much I give. I'm not asking all leaders to do this. In fact, I think perhaps you shouldn't. I think leaders of groups should talk about their giving principles. But I do believe family leaders should talk details with their family. And I consider myself a family leader for this congregation. So I share this in order **to lead by example. To encourage generosity, to practice what I preach, and to set an example** – especially for those who are single, those not in a home group, or those who may not get direction from anyone else, such as those not in a Christian household. So here it is:

* I earn \$----- a year. Before tax. About \$---- a week.

* I also receive a car allowance which pays for the costs of running my car.

* I am also given a house to live in.

* We also receive some government support.

As a family, we work out our total income, before tax. Including all fringe benefits and other income. And we start with 10% giving as a minimum. **Because it seems to us like a good place to start.** It's not a command. We just believe it's a good and helpful place to start.

* So our basic giving is \$---- a year. \$--- a week.

* Then I salary sacrifice about another 10% of my salary to pay for ministry expenses for my work at church. And when we can, we give to special projects or to special needs. Building projects, missions work, hospitality, ministry training. What we're left with as a family is enough to live on, some savings, and some money for holidays and other things like that.

As a family, we've learned dependence on God through generosity, and we have never needed for anything. Half way through Moore College we had \$350 in our bank account. At the end of college we had \$1000, and a baby on the way, and a mortgage on a small unit. But there was never a question that God would look after us.

Are we, as a church, welfare workers? Absolutely – for the glory of God. We are called to do **good** in our community. So our generosity must be **real** as a church. If you've thought through your giving, and are giving generously, cheerfully and biblically, then keep doing it. If God has challenged you, please respond to that challenge today, for this reason – so we as a church can do more good for this city.

I'll leave you with these words. (unread – on screen)

17Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.