

## **Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: July 3<sup>rd</sup>: Gifts and Rewards**

**Jeremiah 25: 5-9:** It is a reasonable bet that most of those who heard this reading in their church on Sunday morning got, unless they had done some homework on Jeremiah, not much out of it. Two prophets having a bit of an argument, and the better known one apparently just a little uncertain whether the other one might be right to be optimistic – but preferring the traditional prophetic role of issuing dire warnings. It isn't wholly unlike the modern situation in which Government Ministers have Special Advisers (Hananiah was the King's prophet and preached patriotic optimism), and these may well be more supportive of Government policies than the (also well qualified) independent expert. The official prophets were not necessarily false prophets who had substituted the party line for the God message. It is interesting that both Jeremiah himself and the writer of the book accept that Hananiah was a real prophet. Jeremiah feels obliged to be pessimistic, but harbours just a little hope that his optimistic rival might be right. Prophets had a habit of bringing forward what they anticipated happening – hence Hananiah's "the exiles are on their way back" message.

**Psalms 89:** This is a Covenant Psalm – about the bond between God and His People/US. The psalm writers believed passionately in a faithful God, but were very honest in recognising both that the people/we were/are not very good at keeping our side of the Covenant, and that at times God can seem to have forgotten about them/us..

**Romans 6: 12-23:** This really doesn't need a commentary. Like the OT Covenant, the Christian Covenant is very one-sided: God gives, we receive. But, as with OT rules, God does call us to live well. Richard III (the Shakesperian one) killing innocent victims and then crossing himself, really doesn't cut it. The world too expects "religious people" to live good lives, and even if these public reputation demands are a bit heavy, you can understand them. Those who proclaim their Christian credentials have something (or Someone) to live up to. Chaucer put it graphically when he spoke about having clean sheep and shepherds covered with shit. (Chaucer had a way with words!)

**Matthew 10: 40-42:** In the Jewish tradition, you honoured the top person by honouring the top person's representative. Here Jesus jumps to recognising in e.g. the down and out beggar that beggar's God.

There is an interesting gloss on the gift/reward debate in UK public policy. Alex Douglas Hume got into trouble for calling his cash bonus for the elderly a donation [gift], rather than an entitlement – though, of course, legally it was an entitlement. Means-tested benefits have always raised issues, whereas people see themselves as having paid for/earned their pension. (The reality is that there is no National Insurance Fund: Taxes and contributions pay for current benefits, not future benefits.)