

264 Diminish not a word

In 598 BC things were looking pretty grim for the people of Judah. For years the Lord God in His mercy had been sending His prophets to warn them that divine judgment was surely coming their way unless they repented and returned to the living God, the God to whom they were committed by covenant. They already had two clear examples before them, of Israel, their equally-sinful northern neighbour, having been swept away by the Assyrians over a hundred years earlier (2 Kings 17.1-23), and Nebuchadnezzar's less-than-friendly visit to Jerusalem in 606 BC (2 Kings 24.1), which soon turned out to be only his first visit

We read in Jeremiah 26.1-6 of a fresh instruction from the Lord to Jeremiah. He was to "stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak unto all the cities of Judah, which come to worship in the Lord's house, all the words that I command thee to speak to them" (v 2), and then come these few, further words – "diminish not a word ...". The substance of the message was all-too-familiar (the Lord can never be accused of judging without warning!) – "repent, or else" – and by "diminishing not a word", Jeremiah was to do nothing to dilute the starkness of the message.

This was a divine commission for Jeremiah to stand at the heart of the nation of Judea, "the house of the Lord", where outwardly all seemed to be going fine in terms of crowds of worshippers bringing their sacrifices. Yet Jeremiah was to stand there in the court and deliver a blunt message of warning which would arouse great anger and hostility – and that is just what happened (26.7-9)! For a time he was facing death for speaking out as he had done, but on this occasion wiser counsels prevailed and Jeremiah was protected by Ahikam (26.10-24).

What of today? In many ways and in many places clearly things are going on well, in terms of peace and plenty, and a whole array of medical and technical marvels. At the same time though deep suffering abounds, arising from wars, natural disasters or economic bleakness, plus an unprecedented number of lives ruined by reckless and sinful social habits. The reality is that the world needs the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our generation as much as it has ever done.

Yet one of the great ironies of this age is the deliberate ignoring of Almighty God in debate and decision-making. For sure, each day in Parliament for example still begins with more-or-less Christian prayers, but after the final "Amen" any reference in the House of Commons to the Bible, God or Jesus Christ would provoke hoots and jeers: sadly Jeremiah would feel at home in such an atmosphere, for truly very little has changed when it comes to the instinctive and wilful rejection of God's Word.

As part of our responsibility to be "the light of the world" shining on Jesus' behalf during His current physical absence from the earth, the Lord requires us also, as with Jeremiah, to "diminish not a word" as we speak courteously and "matter-of-factly" of God's Word and God's truth. The Bible could not be plainer as to who God is, who we are, and how we, by our own efforts, have no hope of bridging the great gulf that exists between Him and us because of human sin. We know that this Bad News tends to be brushed aside today, just as in Jeremiah's time, but if and when this Bad

News is humbly accepted, the Good News in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ suddenly makes such wonderful sense! A few scriptural examples concerning the blend of Bad and Good News must suffice from the dozens available: John 3.16-18 & 35-36; 5.22-24; 6.34-37 & 47-51 / Acts 2.21 & 40 / Romans 1.16-23; 3.28; 5.1; 6.23; 8.1; 10.9 / I Thessalonians 1.9b-10 / 2 Thessalonians 1.7-10 / Hebrews 2.3a, 9-10, 14-15.

As and when we are able to speak of biblical truth it is right to explain the Bad News as carefully as the Good News, for in so doing we do indeed “diminish not a word”.

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