

"In Christ, Blessing Local Communities" (Our Family, Our Mission)

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Preacher: Barry Lee

[0 : 00] Okay, so just before we invite Pastor Barry up, I'll be reading from the book of Jeremiah, chapter 29, verse 1 to 14.

So I'll give you guys a second to turn to that. If you guys have your Bibles, if you have your phone, pull that up. Jeremiah is in the Old Testament after Isaiah. So I'll be reading from the NIV.

Jeremiah 29, a letter to the exiles. This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests.

The prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. This was after King Jehoiachin and the Queen Mother, the court officials, and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans, had gone into exile from Jerusalem. He entrusted the letter to Elisar, son of Shaphan, and to Jemariah, son of Hekiah, whom Zedekiah, king of Judah, sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon.

[1 : 09] It said, This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those are carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Build houses and settle down.

Plant gardens and will eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters. Find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there.

Do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says. Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name.

I have not sent them, declares the Lord. This is what the Lord says.

[2 : 28] I will gather you from all nations and places where I have banished you, declares the Lord, and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.

That's the word of the Lord. I invite Pastor Barry to come out and share with us today. Hi, English Surfers. How are we doing this weekend? Good.

It's always a treat to be back. You know, I just feel like there are more and more kids running around. And I just love the energy here.

Yeah, even though I know comparatively it could be a more quiet weekend for us. Yeah, so thank you, Isaac. Thank you for the worship team. Beautiful music.

And I enjoy the prayer time as well. You know, I wish, you know, our Cantonese brothers and sisters can even consider that. It's lovely. So, now, today we're going to talk about blessing local communities.

[3 : 29] Right? That's one of our four cornerstones of our church mission statements. Right. So, last week, Pastor William talked about how, you know, the multilingual communities came into being, you know.

Remember he showed us the seven or eight kingdoms? Is that seven or eight? Or nine? Yeah. Yeah. And, you know, being multilingual is a beautiful thing.

Right? Because, yeah, I mean, it comes out from Babel, unfortunately. But, you know, God still uses us. You know, multilingual people.

And, yeah, we are also very thankful that PCBC has just started doing that, you know, several years back then. And now, look, we have a new community here.

You know, all English-speaking people. I'm truly, truly excited for us. So, last time, you know, we talked about the big picture. Right?

[4 : 34] Big picture. You know, how God basically uses people of different languages to spread the good news about himself. Now, this week, we're going to, of course, talk about blessing our local communities.

So, we'll dig into two passages. Most of the time will be spent on Jeremiah 29, you know, the top half. And also, we'll touch on Mark 12, a very famous saying from Jesus, love your neighbor as yourself.

So, Jeremiah 29 is a world very, very far away from our setting. Right? Picture this. Israelites were at war.

We are sitting here at peace. They had guns put at their heads or actually sword on their necks. They were forced to relocate.

We have the freedom to choose wherever we want to go. They moved to a foreign place that speaks differently, worships differently, have different diets.

[5 : 46] We live in a place where everything seems so ordinary and comfortable to us, even to a point of blessing. When was the last time you get excited about going to a beach?

When was the last time you get truly excited, going to a restaurant, you know, enjoying your steak and having some good old wine? But those ancient people could bless their community amidst of war and captivity.

Surely, we, in a peaceful country, can do better. Right? Now, let's take a time travel back all the way to 597 BC.

Yep, that's a whopping 2,600 years ago. Picture this. Jerusalem is in ruins.

The Babylonian war machine, led by relentless King Nebuchadnezzar, has left the city broken. It was the first siege. Food and water are dringling.

[7 : 01] They held on, but eventually had to give in. Do you know why the downfall for them? A series of poor decisions, choices, including abandoning Yahweh, the Lord, and some truly heinous acts that I don't even want to mention.

Now, can you imagine Auckland being without our leaders, without teachers, no doctors, and tradesmen?

That's what happened to Jerusalem. The society crumbled. Though battered and bruised, Jerusalem remained standing for another decade or so.

So, Babylon installed a puppet king called Zedekiah to rule over them. But he rebelled against the Babylonian overlord.

And the result? Another siege. More devastation. And the eventual end of the southern kingdom. And we believe that Jeremiah 29 was penned in between the first and the second sieges.

[8 : 19] It's quite interesting to imagine Jeremiah was still around. He wasn't carried into captivity. He was still around Jerusalem at that time. And God has a message to share.

So, Jeremiah wrote a letter and entrusted to a couple of loyal friends heading to the exiled people. Now, from verse 4 onwards, we catch a glimpse of God's heart for the exiles.

I won't dwell into every verse, but here is a quick rundown for us. So, first, God urges the people to make themselves home in their foreign lands.

So, that's verse 4 through 14. Well, after all, the restoration of Jerusalem won't be happening in less than 70 years.

That's what God has promised. So, this is the section we're going to focus on today. And then, if you carry on reading Jeremiah 29, God drops some hard truths about those who are left behind in Jerusalem and warns against putting faith in false prophets.

[9 : 37] And then, God specifically names two self-proclaimed prophets who live immoral lives and preach wrong messages. And God is going to end their nonsense in a very bad way.

That's verse 20 to 23. And then, the final section of the chapter is like Jeremiah printing out an email chain and, you know, chuck it along with the letter as a reference.

So, this time, the Lord speaks against another false prophet called Shemaiah. And this guy dared to call Jeremiah a maniac.

And God didn't take the offense lightly. Now, so, what's this letter about? How can this letter penned by Jeremiah 2,000-something years ago to the folks sent away from their homes teach us about being a blessing to our Kiwi communities?

So, we're going to unpack verses 4 to 7. We'll go, you know, slowly, section by section. So, yeah, we're not going to read that.

[10:54] We just read that. Now, look at these words, right? Can you spot the bolder words? Right? Those are the verbs, the commands, the instructions.

Build houses. Plant gardens. Eat. Marry. Find wives. Increase in number. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city.

Pray to the Lord for it. And so on. Now, imagine, those listening would have been baffled. They thought the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, brought them into exile, right?

But look at verse 4. What does God say? This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all, to those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

So God is like, look, yeah, I know you're all thinking it's the bad Babylonian king to capture you guys.

[12:02] No, it was me. Nebuchadnezzar, he's just my handyman, my agent. Yet, God doesn't stop there.

He doesn't bang on about their old mistakes. He gives them clear next steps. So what are the actions listed out here? First, build houses and settle down.

You need a roof, a secure place to stay. Without some sense of stability, you will be the one who needs help rather than the one who can bless others, right?

Next step. Plant gardens and eat what they produce. After a roof, you need sustenance.

If you're not standing on your own two feet, how can you lend a hand to others? It's like saying to us, get a job. If your usual gig is not there, grab some new skills.

[13:15] Strengthen your financial muscles. Get real and be productive so that we can help others. Then, what's the next verb?

Marry, right? So get married and have a few little ones and we should all salute to Pastor William here. So, look, God even tells them to settle in, to have even grandchildren, next generation and generations.

It's like he's saying, you're going to be here for the long haul. No matter how much you want to return, I'm not going to let you do that.

I'll let it happen according to my timetable. You're going to stay here. Now, the next sentence goes, increase in number.

Do not decrease. Does it ring a bell to you? Does it sound familiar to you? Increase in number.

[14:28] It actually echoes the very first chapter of the Bible. Genesis 1, verse 28. Be fruitful and increase in number.

God's asking them to keep the ball rolling even in a foreign territory. It's like he's reminding them, hey, do you remember the original plan?

Populate the planet. Don't toss it out just because you're having a rough time. The next verse, verse 7, is our key verse today.

Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I've carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it because if it prospers, you too will prosper.

In the original language, peace and prosperity is simply one word. Can you guess it? You've heard this word multiple times. If you have been, yeah, shalom.

[15:35] That's it. Peace and prosperity boil down to one word. Shalom. Now, shalom isn't just a casual peace, you know.

It carries a much deeper meaning like being healthy, being successful, being prosperous, and wholesome. Imagine the exiles hearing this.

God, are you serious? You want us to root for our enemies after what they did to us. They will be fuming, ready to revolt.

But God is firm. He says, hold on to that anger. Channel it into service and collaboration.

Seek peace, not just for you, but for them. Their judgment day will come, but is not on your watch.

[16:38] Imagine the reaction. Probably a mix of shock, disbelief, and a smidge of temptation to listen to the false prophets. Right? They would be telling a much more palatable story like, hey, you know what?

Babylon will be a short stay. We'll be back to Jerusalem in no time. Maybe in a couple of years. God told me in a dream. And God knows these rumors will fly.

So He's got an answer ready in verses 8 and 9 and actually onwards. So, 8 and 9 says, do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you.

Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. Their prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them, declares the Lord. God is essentially saying, don't even think about returning to Jerusalem yet.

Your punishment time is not up. If you do, you're going to die with them. Consider yourself warned. So, there is really no option here if you're a God-fearing Jew.

[18:01] You'd better stay, seek the peace prosperity of the people that you don't like. and even pray for them. Yes, even pray for them.

Pray for the enemy city as a whole. Pray for your oppressor so they can prosper. Think about that. Pray for its protection.

And you'll be like, what? We can't wait to overthrow them. You pray for its welfare. No, they're going to train even more soldiers to destroy our homeland.

You can see the heart-wrenching struggle the Jews would be experiencing. God is saying, your livelihood will now be inseparable from them.

If they do well, so do you. Your lives are intermingled now. You've got to think the long game. If you do well, your descendants will live to see the amazing promise I'm giving you now.

[19:15] After 70 years is completed, I will bring my people back. Now, verse 11 gives a glimmer of hope.

So, for I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. It's like God is saying, I've got big plans for you, for your own good.

Those are plans brimming with hope. Reach out to me. I'll be there. I've got your back. And when the time is right, you will find your way home.

Now, fast forward to us Kiwis, okay, or Kiwi Chinese, or Kiwi Asians, or whatnot. We are not in enemy territory. We are chilling here in our terror.

We could be fighting over rugby or politics, but probably nothing more than that. Seeking peace, praying for prosperity sounds pretty doable, right?

[20:34] Perhaps not quite. So, what does it mean to seek the peace and prosperity in Oakland, especially right here in Parkouranga?

First, we need to know our neighbours a bit better. When people ask Jesus what the most important commandments are, he says, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

The second is this, love your neighbour as yourself. There is no greater commandment than these. Now, let's dig a little bit deeper.

Who exactly is our neighbour? We really need to know who those folks are in order to genuinely love them, right? So, in a culture where everyone is thinking alike, talking alike, it's quite easy to spot your neighbours.

They could be living just next door or just down the road. I call this the definition by physical proximity. They're near us. So, but you also know sometimes proximity can introduce us to unexpected neighbours.

[22:02] So, in the good Samaritan story in the Bible, Jesus tells a story about a man who was beaten half dead by robbers. Two religious guys just stroll on and pass him by.

But surprisingly, a Samaritan, a real outsider in Jewish eyes comes to his help. So, he bandages the man's wounds, takes him to an inn, and pays for his stay.

You see, the good Samaritan story somewhat echoes the Jeremiah 29 passage. If you ask the Samaritan, hey, mate, do you really get along with the Jews?

he'll probably reply, nah, not really. But yet, his actions tell a different story, right? He looked beyond culture and saw a fellow human being in need.

And you can see his heart is overflowing with compassion, just simply love for another person. so, if we're keen on loving our neighbors as ourselves, we need to see past our cultural fences.

[23:28] But, now, how do we do that in our day-to-day situation? So, we need to know about them, right?

So, we need to communicate, we need to talk to our neighbors. But we can do that only with words. Now, but we all know that, you know, striking up a conversation with someone who is wildly different from yours can be very tricky.

Now, consider this little data, sorry, it's a little bit too small, but you get the idea, is from StatsNZ. So, PCBC situates, you know, at the south of this area called Pagranga Heights, southwest. And I think, you know, the stats of our district here, it's a pretty fair snapshot for East Auckland in general. So, now, you see, half, almost half of the people hail from overseas, and many of them are from Asia. Sorry, the font is a little bit too small there.

[24 : 43] So, naturally, some might wrestle a bit with English, you know, like myself. Are we going to ignore them if they're not fluent? Can we make the effort to truly listen to them, even though the accent is thick?

Or they phrase things differently? Will we adjust our pace to speak a tad slower to ensure that they get what we are talking about?

Now, to genuinely cherish our neighbours, we also need to bridge those gaps in communication. So, if we truly be courageous to outreach to people different from us, we would be walking outside of our comfort zone.

It takes courage. So, to bring peace and prosperity to our city, we must understand its needs. But how? By reaching out and connecting with everyone around us, no matter how different their background is.

people are so, I think this idea ties in very nicely with Pastor William talks about the multilingual mission last time.

[26 : 02] But look, we are in a modern age. We are no longer bound by the physical proximity, right?

We can go to anywhere we like, by cars, by planes. So, neighbours, I'm just about who's living next door. We are not just limited in Pekoranga, obviously.

We've got folks coming to our church, from Armiston, even some of them from North Shore. You know why? Because they've built a bond with us.

And more importantly, we share the same mother tongue with them. Yeah, some of them are Cantonese. And we also share the same cultural heritage that is from China and Hong Kong. I'm going to label this as cultural proximity. factor. Now, these new immigrants are our cultural neighbour, so to speak.

[27 : 11] The church welcomes them with open arms, making them feel at home. Now, here at PCBC, they can find a spiritual haven and a community that speaks their language.

Sometimes you can only unlock the heart with the mother tongue, right? As new immigrants, they also face many day-to-day challenges that can be crippling to living a normal life in this new country.

So, speaking their mother tongue can help them tremendously. I'll tell you a story. I missed that slide. Anyway, so, eight years ago, my wife Jenny and I were basically in their shoes as new immigrants, fresh off the boat, so to speak, from Hong Kong.

But the PCBC family, you lot, embraced us from the get-go. people. The church people helped us find a place to rent, buy our first car, and help us set up our bank accounts.

Incredible people. So, having folks who speak our mother tongue, you know, which is Cantonese, make a whole world of difference for us, especially when we have to navigate in this new surrounding.

[28 : 35] So, we won't deny it. PCBC is still an immigrant church. Even though most of you here won't feel like it, because you grew up here, you may never have, you may have never migrated.

This has been your homeland all along. So, for second-gen folks here, it may sound like a distant echo, you know, but that's where the older generation steps in, you know, working, let them work their magic, you know, to connect with the new families coming in to our city.

So, let's cheer on them, right, as they also root for us, our English-speaking people here, you know, you guys are also doing amazing, amazing outreach to the second-generation English-speaking people as well.

people. So, look, PCBC is really good at making newcomers feel at home. I experienced that.

God has used us to bless many families in the past, and will continue to do so in the future. So, our mission is like we support each other, you know, across the congregations.

[30 : 01] For example, our sister Mandy, you can see the person in the middle, she is a registered social worker both in New Zealand and in Hong Kong.

She's an expert. So, she'll be holding a dementia talk right here at our church, you know, serving the community, but it will be done in Cantonese.

Right? You can imagine like most, you know, elderly folks, they wouldn't be able to deal with the complicated lingual, medical terms and whatnot in English.

It has to be delivered in Cantonese so that they would know how to take care of themselves, and also their family would know how to take care of them. You know, not too many of those people would be fluent in English.

so we do need our Cantonese speaking brothers and sisters. So, look, this is one of the things that we have been doing to bless the community right here.

[31 : 16] So, but we're also aware that we shouldn't, you know, pigeonhole ourselves into thinking that, okay, we're all only, you know, serving Cantonese speaking people or their second generation.

No, no, no, no, not like that, okay? We should aim to outreach to everyone else. Cantonese speaking, English speaking, this is your niche, brothers and sisters, to outreach, okay, to Asians, non-Asians, you know?

And also, I realize many of you are blessed with the gift of being bilingual or even trilingual, right? How many of you can affluence like bilingually? How many? Yeah, yeah, yeah, don't be shy, don't be shy, okay, yeah, I know most of you are.

Okay, how many of you are like, you can speak three languages, yeah, I see some hands, very nice. Yeah, it's a truly wonderful gift.

[32 : 32] And the best thing of all is that you are well integrated into the mainstream society here, which is something the first gen people can't do. Now, let's reflect on the Jeremiah passage one more time.

Oi, friends, the houses have already been built, gardens already planted by people before us. Our first gen people have laid down the groundwork, and now you are in the perfect spot to contribute to our city's thriving.

So we are at a pivotal point. What shall we do next? Now, when we think of ways to bless our surrounding communities, we usually think of church projects or initiatives that can help us connect with them, so that we can share the gospel to them.

That's a very noble goal. But let me ask you a very honest question. Would we be up for projects without immediate perks for our church?

By perks, I mean things like a sudden surge in church attendance. More folks coming in, converting to Christianity, more folks welcoming Jesus into their lives.

[34 : 01] If that happens, hallelujah. Look again at the passage that we study today. Jesus tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And Jeremiah actually the Lord himself tells us to bless the city we're living by seeking peace and prosperity for them. It is a mandate with no strings attached.

It is unconditional, you see? It doesn't guarantee a spiritual awakening across the town. If it sparks one, perfect.

But you know, it is really not in our hands. So let's do good for the simple sake of doing good. No hidden agendas.

No strings attached. We just give unconditionally. So next, I want to share with you a glimpse of the projects or initiatives being run by our church and also the wider Baptist funnel.

[35 : 09] some are very small in scale, some are huge. So let's see. How many of you are there?

We were there last week. Any hands? Yeah? Very nice, very nice. Yes. Yay. Now, car wash is such a blessing to our community, right?

You know, you get to see all sorts of different people coming in. They were chatting with us. They were having coffee with us. You know, and actually I met that, you see that white shirt, dressing, the gentleman dressing in traditional Indian dress.

Yeah, we just become friends over the past week. And we've been almost WhatsApping each other every day. Seriously.

Yeah, so praise God for that. So, car wash really works. Okay? And we're not just outwishing to Chinese people, you know?

[36 : 20] So this is such a brilliant thing. Now, beyond car wash, PCBs also got a whole array of services to bless the communities.

For example, we have, okay, yeah, this is our community ministry committee that oversees all the initiatives.

We have the elderly outreach, right? Usually on Wednesday, we have the rest home outreach to the elderly folks.

people okay? So, yeah, next time, you know, yeah, give some encouragement to Pastor Andrew, okay? He's doing all the hard work here on that front. And we have the English class for new immigrants on Tuesday morning, okay?

Yeah, quite a lot of people joins us, so it's very good. we have prison outreach as well. And last but not least, your favorite, the sports ministry.

[37 : 32] Yeah, how many of you have just come pop over from your sports? Yeah? Lovely. So, I'm going to show you something more than our church now, okay?

So, Eastview, our neighbor, Eastview Baptist, you know, just down Chapel Road. This is the church where I did my practicum. And you see this gentleman there.

His name is Bernard. He's a whiz at dismantling equipment, and also he's really good at teaching the other church members doing that.

So, they turn old tanks into recyclable materials. And last year, you know how much they made by recycling materials, by breaking things down?

\$20,000. \$20,000. And they used that money, every cent, to support missionaries. Yeah.

[38 : 35] So, that's recycling for a cause. Brilliant stuff. Now, for something more ambitious, Glen Eden Baptist in West Oakland is doing something incredible.

So, their Vision West initiative offers emergency housing, social housing, you know, financial mentorship, and providing food, and so on.

people, so they're really helping a lot of the people in need. You see, our Baptist Vano around the country are doing these wonderful initiatives to bring shalom to our neighbors.

Now, at this point, you may be thinking, ah, so what shall we do? What shall we come up as PCBC's next flagship project to bless our local community?

I'll tell you. The next flagship project is you. Simply you. Seek the shalom of the city.

[39 : 50] Pray to the Lord for it, because when it thrives, so do you. Many of you right now are perfectly poised to bring shalom to our city.

If your profession is in accounting, you can bless your clients with your integrity and honesty to help them become better stewards.

You may even help them set up charitable giving so that their profits can feed back to bless the communities. If your profession is in health care or medicine, you can bless your patients by being compassionate and acting as the hands and feet of Jesus Christ.

You bring healing and comfort to them and their family. If your profession is architecture, you can bless the city by designing buildings that are environmentally sustainable.

You can also use architecture to foster community space so people can live out Jesus' command to love one another. community and if your profession is IT, you can bless your clients by upholding data integrity, by also making data and technology accessible to those in need.

[41 : 08] You can use your geeky skills to prevent fraud and other harmful cyber activities. If your profession is teaching, you can bless the community by being a good carer and a role model, you can create an inclusive environment that reflects Jesus' love for everybody.

Look, I know, I'm just barely scratching the surface here. If you are a follower of Christ, the Holy Spirit will show you unique ways to pour out blessings from your daily grind.

So, sometimes, it's just as simple as putting your heart into doing something. God will make things happen for you. So, what's our job as Christians in the end?

Bring peace, love, and shalom to our city and our neighbors. So, finally, our neighbors are everywhere, both in the physical and cultural senses.

There are two main avenues to send our blessings. things. We can initiate church projects that resonate with our vibe, or simply just excel in our daily job.

[42 : 29] Every email stand, every hiccup resolved, every warm, smile shared, can bring shalom throughout the community. community. So, I would love to invite the worship team to come.

At this time, I would like every one of us here to pray and to reflect what God is saying to you today, how God can use your vantage point to bless our community.

Could it be your career, your job, your study? I'm going to let Sean, yeah, could you please pass, yes, pass the papers down, okay?

And I want you to jot down something, okay? It can be something to yourself. It will be even better if you write down something that we can share and post it up to the board outside, okay?

Or we can actually collect it in the basket, yeah, it will be a better way, okay? Feel free to write down your name, okay? Think of any church initiatives, projects that might, that God might have put into your heart.

[43 : 56] Write it down, okay? Take some time, please. And we'll use this space here to ponder how we can share our love with our neighbors.

How can we bring shalom to Oakland? Thank you. So, I understand you may want to take a little bit more time, but I want to invite us to pray together before we sing our response song, all right?

So you can keep going when you sing the song. So, shall we pray together? dear Lord, thank you for your word spoken through Jeremiah and through Jesus.

Lord, stir us into action to really cherish and uplift our neighbors. Fill us with love and compassion so we can keep on giving and pouring out our lives to bless them unconditionally just as you poured out your life to us.

Thank you, Lord Jesus. In your most precious name we pray. Amen.