

Jeremiah lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem

By Rembrandt



Jeremiah mourning the destruction of Jerusalem

This picture is used by Fiona on Advent 2, as the wreath commemorates the prophets.

This was painted by Rembrandt in 1630, when he was 24 and just before he moved from Leiden to Amsterdam and is considered to be his early masterpiece.

The scene is set towards the end of the book of Jeremiah. He has repeatedly told the Kings of the threat from Babylon but they didn't want to listen, preferring instead to listen to false prophets who said everything would be fine. Jeremiah was first imprisoned in a well and then kept under guard in the palace courtyard. King Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon with the result that Jerusalem was captured and laid waste and the royal family killed in front of the king, who was then blinded and exiled. It was the Babylonians who recognised Jeremiah's holiness and freed him before the palace was burned.

Jeremiah is shown sitting above the city, sorrowing as it burns, and the light from the fires illuminates his face. Rembrandt's careful brush strokes show every detail of his face: the wrinkled brow and downcast eyes are lovingly detailed and there is a palpable sense of his sorrow. He leans on his left arm in a gesture of despair but his elbow rests on the Bible, emphasising his connection with God and hope for the future. The rich red velvet of the cloth and the fur details of his gown give promise of Rembrandt's future success as a society portrait painter. The golden vessels suggest that he was able to salvage some of the precious items from the Temple and it is likely that Rembrandt was aware of this detail from Josephus' history, which amplifies the biblical text.

In contrast to the fine brush strokes for Jeremiah, Rembrandt used a much rougher treatment for the burning city. Paint is layered on in an impasto technique, which uses the blunt end of the brush, or a knife, scraping into the wet paint. The city is in the dark, creating a chiaroscuro technique that further highlights importance of the prophet. A careful look at the stairs in front of the city reveals a man with his hands over his eyes, this is the blinded Zedekiah.

Jeremiah sits diagonally across the picture, commanding the scene as his figure stretches from the left hand to the right hand third. The light cloud behind him echoes the diagonal and also connects him to the smoke of the city, while at the same time giving a suggestion that this may be part of his prophetic vision rather than an actual event.

This masterful, thoughtful, picture repays study and can itself be used as a meditation and metaphor for an age rushing to destruction and failing to hear those who warn of disaster.