
Sunday 21st March – The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34 & John 12:20-33

Jeremiah 31:31-34

‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,’
declares the Lord.

‘This is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,’ declares the Lord.

‘I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

No longer will they teach their neighbour,
or say to one another, “Know the Lord,”
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,’
declares the Lord.

‘For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.’

John 12:20-33

Jesus predicts his death

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. ‘Sir,’

they said, 'we would like to see Jesus.' Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

Jesus replied, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

'Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.' The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

Jesus said, 'This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

Reflection

This week marks almost exactly a year since the first lockdown was imposed. Little did we imagine back then how this last year would unfold, and for each one of us in our own way, it's been a difficult year. We have missed meeting together. We miss singing together, hugging one another. Children have missed their school friends, grandparents their grandchildren, we miss going to pubs, theatres and restaurants, we miss going on holidays, I've done more of my course on zoom than I have in person, and we're all aware of the toll it has taken on people's physical and mental health. It's been a difficult year.

But now, with the rapid roll-out of the vaccine, we have a road map out of these restrictions as non-essential shops open in three weeks' time if all goes well and a further easing of restrictions thereafter. So alongside the difficulties and anxieties we've experienced, there is a sense of hope, impending freedom and newness in knowing where we're headed. The tension that these conflicting feelings create is perhaps appropriate for the season of Lent as we focus on the coming death of Jesus whilst aware in our post-Easter world of the promise of new life that this brings. Appropriate also as we consider this passage from Jeremiah in which he speaks of a new start and a new covenant for the Jewish people who were suffering in exile. *The days are coming*, says the prophet Jeremiah. As we come out of

lockdown, as we move towards Palm Sunday and Holy Week, these are words we need to hear.

Jeremiah is often referred to as the weeping prophet, as most of his book is a constant call for the people to repent, and warnings of the judgement that will inevitably come in the face of Judah's broken promises. And now, the people have lost their king, their homeland, and their temple. But though this punishment is real, God does not allow it to be his final word. He speaks of redemption, salvation and a future hope.

The days are coming... but they are not yet here. God is to make a new covenant with his people, a covenant which supersedes that which he made with them at Sinai. This is the only time that the term new covenant is mentioned in the Old Testament, though it appears 8 times in our New Testament, and of course we hear the term week by week, as we shall later this morning, in the words of the Eucharistic prayer, when we speak of the wine as the cup of the new covenant. Although the term might be familiar to us, we need to be mindful of how momentous this new covenant is.

So Jeremiah is making here a sharp contrast between this covenant and the one made with Moses. There God had said, *I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God* (Exodus 6:7), but as we know, the people didn't keep their half of the bargain, they made idols, they intermarried and followed the gods of the surrounding nations. God had bound himself to his people as a husband, but they committed spiritual adultery. It is in this context that God speaks words of compassion, reconciliation and redemption. A day is coming in which a new covenant will be established and the failure of the old covenant made at Sinai will be a distant memory.

This new covenant will not be written on tablets of stone but on the hearts of God's people. In 17:1 Jeremiah says that Judah's sins are engraved on their hearts, but now that is to be erased, and replaced with God's word and will. The heart in the Old Testament is more than just the seat of the emotions, it is about who you are, what you know and where decisions are made. So God's law will not be words on stone that need to be memorised but words engraved on our hearts that we will know and want to obey.

Second, God promises *I will be their God and they will be my people*. Whereas the first covenant was just for the nation of Israel, this new covenant is for all, the house of Israel, the house of Judah and Gentiles too. It offers a unique personal relationship with God himself which we enter into, not as individuals, but collectively, as part of something much bigger, the body of Christ. Then in verse 34, God says *they*

will all know me. From the greatest to the least they will all know me. Gods with a little g in those days weren't knowable; they had to be appeased, and they certainly weren't friends. But in John 15:15 Jesus to his disciples *I have called you friends.*

And all this is possible because of what God says in the last verse. *For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.* He will write his laws on the hearts and they will know him personally because he will forgive their sins and remember them no more. In this fifth Sunday of Lent we remember that it is in the person of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross that the new covenant is to be found. The forgiveness of our sins as we put our faith in Jesus is what makes possible the renewal of our hearts.

The days are coming but they are not yet here. In this season of Lent, we face the celebration of Palm Sunday and the intensity and passion of Holy Week before we can celebrate Easter. In our own lives here and now, the way of lockdown has been prepared but we need to hold our horses for a while longer. As we do so, maybe now is a time to reflect on our own personal covenant with God. Where do we stand in relation to him at the moment? Has lockdown meant that our spiritual lives have taken a bit of a hit? Are we ready to make a new start with Jesus in this new season whatever it looks like, to confess our sins, mourn our failures and to set our paths once more to follow him, recognising that no matter how broken the world might seem *the days are coming, declares the Lord.*

~ Lesley Bell ~