

Lent 5
18/3/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51
John 12:20-33

Forgiveness as good as innocence

...this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

This is surely a prophecy most beautiful. It is perhaps surprising, then, given how moving Jeremiah's account of the new covenant is, that the New Testament makes little use of Jeremiah's saying. There is a reference to a new covenant in some of the sayings of Jesus around the last supper but this would make perfect sense if Jeremiah had never spoken of a new covenant. And the whole passage we have heard from Jeremiah today is quoted in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, but there it is used for the letter's own particular polemical purposes.

This is not to say Jeremiah's prophecy is not known, or is largely forgotten by the New Testament, but to say that it is not *necessary* for the New Testament. Rather, the New Testament's understanding of what happens with Jesus as much interprets Jeremiah, as Jeremiah might help to interpret Jesus. Put differently, Christians don't get to God on the basis of the promise in Jeremiah alone; we have to read Jeremiah here through the cross.

Jeremiah promises a new covenant 'unlike' the first. The 'unlikeness' is that the first covenant was broken but this one will not be. The sign of the unbreakability of the new covenant is that the law will be written within the being of the covenant people: 'I will write it on their hearts'. Alongside this we hear, 'no longer shall they say to each other, "Know the LORD," for all shall *already* know the LORD, because God will have forgiven 'their iniquity, and [will] remember their sin no more.'

Jeremiah piles up a new covenant, an interior covenant, a heart covenant, a new kind of knowledge of God, and binds this up with forgiveness of sin. If we are to comprehend this, and find ourselves comprehended *by* it, then each element must carry its full weight: new, interior, heart, knowledge, forgiveness of sin.

We could tease out each of these elements one at a time, but instead we'll come at Jeremiah's new covenant from the angle of its *unbreakability*. How can the covenant be unbreakable when there is nothing new about the human covenant partners themselves?

The unbreakability is not in that the covenant is made of very tough stuff – a diamond standard covenant. The covenant cannot be broken because it is *made* of brokenness, of what is *already* broken. Jeremiah's prophecy is not a utopic vision. It is spoken into the devastating fall of Jerusalem, interpreted as the cost of breaking the covenant with God. 'I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more' is the basis of the heart-covenant God promises. These are *broken* hearts, restored. And so the knowledge of

God promised here is not immediate, direct-line awareness of God without reference to world or history. This intimate knowledge comes through the agony of the broken covenant. The heart which knows God in this way knows *forgiveness*, knows itself as a heart which has been torn apart but is now restored. Jeremiah does not speak a word of comfort to hurting people; he proclaims forgiveness to sinners.

The unbreakable covenant is unbreakable because it is made of such brokenness. This is the interiority of the new covenant; this is how the new covenant gets inside of us.

It is here the cross becomes important because, if nothing else, it stands for the harsh realities of human being. But this harsh reality is not the physical suffering of crucifixion. It is, rather, precisely the kind of covenant-breaking against which Jeremiah and the other prophets preached. The *resurrection* of Jesus presents to us that Jesus was the embodiment of the covenant, the presence of God actively reigning in a human life. The resurrection opens our eyes to the fact that the *cross* was sheer catastrophe: the rejection of the covenant embodied in Jesus. The fall of Jerusalem and the cross of Jesus are the same kind of thing: signs of the broken covenant.

In what way is the new covenant ‘in Jesus’ blood’ made from brokenness? Here the liturgy helps, and the breaking of bread and blessing of a cup in particular. In the distribution of the elements of bread and wine, we hear that they are the body and the blood of Christ broken and poured out ‘for you’ in a new covenant. In its own way, this is quite right. But it doesn’t mean that the body and the blood are a kind of ‘price’ God pays for us to be reconciled: ‘God did this for you’. If this were what it meant then we would be right to object to the cross and the body-and-blood language, although not for the reason many do.

We typically object to the notion that God might have killed someone on our behalf – particularly God’s own ‘Son’, and then to the ‘icky-ness’ of the implied cannibalism. But these are secondary distractions which arise from a more fundamental misunderstanding, which is to imagine that what happens between us and God is in fact *external* to us, a transaction between God and we’re-not-sure-who that doesn’t quite *involve* us even though we are the beneficiaries. This is the problem with the ‘for you’ language: it suggests that we are beneficiaries of a third-party exchange.

But if Jeremiah is right – if God does go to the heart of the matter in dealing with us – then the body and blood of Jesus are broken ‘for’ us only if they are also broken *by* us. Here is the ‘interiority’ of the new covenant. Our failure in our relationship with God – the cross, of which the bread and the wine is the sign – is the stuff out of which God builds a new relationship, a new “Body of Christ”. The new covenant is made of the broken shards of the old covenant.

This can be so only because this is the kind of God we are dealing with here. God is *most* God when creating something out of nothing. The nothing in Jeremiah’s preaching is the broken people of Judah. The nothing in the resurrection is the broken body of Jesus. The *something* created is the new covenant, the Body of Christ made again from the broken body of Christ.

To receive bread and wine at the Lord’s Table is to participate in an act of forgiveness. It is to be forgiven for what the bread and the wine represent – rejection of the law of love and the freedom of God.

Two thousand years later, of course, it is not possible for us to be personally accountable for the crucifixion of Jesus. But the demands of the law of love remain and we cannot be confident that we have lived, loved, given 'enough'. (Even this way of putting the problem creates the problem again – as if there could be 'enough' love). And the terrifying freedom of God continues to rampage, asking more than we want to give, seemingly even breaking God's own commandments.

The bread and the cup are all bodies broken by anger or neglect, all denied requests for love, all refusals of mercy. The bread and the cup are all fallings-short of the law of love.

But the bread and the cup are also employed in this space as the sign of God's freedom to forgive – that most fundamental violation of demands of justice and the point at which love breaks free of law and is just love: God inside us, we inside God.

This prophecy most beautiful of Jeremiah is no sentimental longing to be over it all. It knows that we are *caught up* in 'it all' – as much perpetrators as victims. This being the case, it declares that forgiveness is as good as innocence and it invites us, then, to be forgiven, and to forgive.

This is the new covenant Jesus brings.
