

Pentecost 21
17/10/2010

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 31:27-34
Psalm 119:97-104
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8

Living towards God: the New Covenant in the heart

There have been several celebrations this week, but the most breathtaking was the emergence of the Chilean miners from 79 days trapped underground. There is hardly a worse place or a worse fate to have to contemplate and when disaster struck the men could have been excused for believing their life was over. As contact was made and support was given, it is easy to imagine how they may have hovered between hope and despair as they waited for their deliverance to arrive. Now that they are safe, it is certain their lives will not be the same, and their values are likely to be different from before. And the Chilean President has said their experience will change his country, bringing a new vision of itself, and new practices to work safety.

The prophet Jeremiah had a difficult task to perform. He had to invite the people to confront the reality of the historical tragedy of their exile. And they were challenged to live in hope that God would bring a far-reaching newness to their situation. These two things are always there in Jeremiah. There is no denial of harsh reality, and he never turns away from the possibility of hope in God. Today we reach the high point of Jeremiah's vision of restoration and renewal. What he offers us is pivotal in scripture. And we must not forget that his view of radical newness comes from the end time: it speaks of a reality that awaits fulfilment in the future as a gift from God.

Jeremiah's first oracle speaks of the 're-seeding' of Holy Land. This in itself is an act of forgiveness, which refutes the proverb: *the parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge* [31:29]. The newness in which the people will live will overcome their fatalistic attitude that clung to the failures of the past. The second oracle speaks of a new relationship with God: a new covenant that flows from the heart.

The language of 'new covenant' comes easily to Christians and we have to work hard to appreciate how new this was for the people of the day. In the past Moses received the Law, which expressed their relationship with God, and obedience carried with it the promise of life. But now Israel had journeyed through unfaithfulness into the death-dealing crisis of exile. But, as surely as there had been a plucking up and breaking down, now came a building and planting. Against all odds they were delivered into new life that came with the promise of a unique kind of newness.

A horizon of salvation opens here, but there is much more to it than the promise of resumption of life in the land. Without cause or explanation God resolved to establish a new relationship with the people. *“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; ...I shall be their God and they shall be my people.”* [31:31]. The new covenant is not a new law. What is new is where it will be seated. In the future the heart of the community - the mainspring of its understanding and will to act - will be so engraved with the knowledge of God that the inclination to faithful living will be natural. The nearest analogy would be that of a marriage or a relationship of profound love in which the knowledge that a person is loved so fills their being their response is unequivocal. Likewise in the community of Israel, all will live in genuine openness towards God. This grace filled new beginning is possible, not because the people have turned around, but because God has embraced them in their brokenness and alienation. Previously Jeremiah had said there was as much hope of Israel doing God’s will, as there was of an Ethiopian changing the colour of his skin or a leopard its spots. The wonder proclaimed in the new covenant is that God has turned towards the people to reshape something at the foundation of their life. Spomething that will dissolve their resistance. The deeper fulfilment of what is promised here lies ahead of Israel, but their return to life from the death of exile is a concrete sign of God’s ongoing wish to do them good, something understood since the call of Abraham.

The graphic on the Order of Service is of a heart superimposed by a cross because Christians believe that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Jew the faithfulness of heart sought by God has been fully expressed among us. This is a gift of God to us through one of us. No longer is God confined to the holy mountain and known face to face only to Moses. In Jesus Christ God has come to know us, not in the speculative or intellectual sense, but in the relational sense - the intimacy of a life giving, community-creating blood brother and friend.

In Luke’s Gospel we see this most clearly in the story of the two on the road to Emmaus. They had been through the crisis of Good Friday. They knew the scriptures, but were in despair. In their conversation with Jesus and at the breaking of bread, the events that weighed so heavily on them evaporated. They were brought alive in a heart-felt way. Their energy was released and their joy compeled them to return to the others and tell their story. Their message was that Jesus baptised, tempted, forgiving, healing, dying and raised to new life is ‘sacrament.’ Here is God-with-us, mediating the presence of God in a life like ours. Thanks to God’s gift Jesus’ death and new life is central to the life of the community and the cross is the sign the people who live from him seek to grow according to his shaping of their life.

As we look about our world today Jeremiah’s idea that human hearts might naturally incline towards the ways of God has an air of fanciful illusion about it. As the threat of terrorism continues to stalk our world and our own government seeks new ways to protect its borders against those fleeing the wars it has had a hand in, it seems that no matter how much humans profess peace, it is clear they act differently. It is hard for us to believe in the biblical view that, beyond all that we can see and know there is a larger purposefulness in life: but Jeremiah and Jesus are signs to us that God is at work in the realities of history, bringing life out of death and destruction.

The last part of the Creed we share every week declares that we believe in the communion of saints and the life of the world to come. That is to say, hope in God transcends all human purposes for life. Our life as a Christian congregation is wedded to this tradition of belief. Our Commissioning of Gus to be an Elder is a living sign of our trust that if God is God, there will be a church in the next generation, not because of what we do, but because of the promise of the living God. We trust this because these texts, these songs, this liturgy and this community remind us there is one we know who is intimately acquainted with the worst that we can do, who was not repelled by our hardness of heart or will to destroy life. Instead he followed God from his heart and allowed his life to be shaped and moulded by a will other than his own. His love for us was not a legal imposition, but flowed from an inner necessity driven by grace and love. His life reveals what a life formed by living in the will of God looks like. Above all, his being raised up to new life is a hint to us that despite our opposition, God does indeed will our good and we can have hope that no matter what befalls us, the power of Life is with us. Thanks be to God.
