

Pentecost 19
29/9/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15
Psalm 91
Luke 16:19-31

The promise-making God

There is a cynical wisdom which advises: when there is blood in the streets, buy real estate. It is a wisdom borne of observation on the natural cycle of things: the desire to flee a war-torn state drops prices, which will only rise again when the political situation stabilises. In our reading this morning, Jeremiah buys a plot of land at a time when it is becoming increasingly obvious that the place is about to be overrun. But this is not a smart investment in the future. The point of the prophet's investment is as a "word" of hope.

If you've been reading through Jeremiah, you'll have noticed that speaking hope is not one of his strong points. Jeremiah's particular vocation was to proclaim the coming destruction and to interpret it as the judgement of God. Yet in these few chapters (cc30-33) the hope theme emerges clearly as a kind of break in the middle of the book. The hope given, or promise made, is quite specific: there will be a new future: "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land". This is not, of course, a promise to us. Once again, as always with these ancient texts, we are overhearing an exchange between God and God's people which is now some 2600 years old. The specific content of what is promised here can no longer concern us, as we are not threatened as were Jeremiah's people, and so his words are not a promise to us. We can, however, ask about what this reveals about the God who speaks here, assuming that we are today dealing with just the same God.

We do well to reflect first on the idea of a promise, familiar enough to us all but, like many things, by virtue of its very familiarity not often "dissected" to understand what it actually is. A promise is a way of linking the present and the future in such a way that the present, or our experience of the present, is changed by the promised future. A promise is, literally, a "sending-before" (Latin: pro-mittere), a kind of early arrival of what is promised, in that the anticipation begins to change where we are now, even before the thing is realised. Promise has to do with need and satisfaction: the promised return of a lover mitigates the loneliness now felt, through anticipation of embrace which is to come. Promise has to do with suffering and relief: this will not be forever, and so can perhaps be endured a little more easily.

Some promises we might characterise as "natural". These are the "if-then" kind of promises: if this is the case (there is blood in the streets), then that will follow (the depressed economy will one day rise again). This is promise as "potential". When we say that an idea or a person "has potential" or is "promising", we mean that we can see a range of possible good outcomes, on the basis of having seen similar ideas or persons deliver in the same kind of way. If "these" things are in place, then "those" outcomes can be expected.

But this is not the kind of promise which is indicated in Jeremiah's claim on the future. There is nothing promising in *this* situation. And this brings us to a kind of promise which is not "natural", which is not a matter of inherent potential. It is, in a sense, a promise which comes out of nowhere. Here we are wholly dependent on the character of the one who makes the promise: first, on the faithfulness of the promise maker and, second, on the capacity of the one who promises to bring to reality what is promised. *Will* the promise be kept, and *can* it be kept?

What distinguishes this kind of promise from the mere "potential" we've already noted is the personal dimension, the address of one to another: *I will*. Here a free agent acts by promising something to another, and binds herself to that other. Between the one who promises and the promised stands nothing but the promise, resting on the faithfulness and capacity of the promiser. If there is compulsion, then it is not promise; if it was going to be delivered regardless of the promise then, again, it is not promise. "I promise" binds two persons *as* persons, giving and receiving.

This we see in our reading from Jeremiah this morning: "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land". And yet it is important for us to keep in mind that for Israel the very land itself is a promise of the *presence of God*. What is promised is not simply the return of "the stuff" which is about to be lost but the presence of God himself: *I will be there*. This being said, it cannot be inferred that, therefore, God is not already present. According to the story of Moses standing before the burning bush, "I will be there" is only half the name of God: "I will be there *as* I will be there". This translation of the divine name designates God as free to be present as he determines to be present. In the preaching of Jeremiah God is present as judge, with Babylon his executioner. In the ray of hope which flashes through a crack in the proclaimed doom, God promises again to be present as provider and sustainer. As we saw in the text last week, it is the pathos of Judah that it can only imagine God present as provider and sustainer: "Is the Lord not in Zion?" (Jeremiah 8.19). Is then, the land not safe? They, and we, are happy for God to be there, as *we* will that he be there.

With this there begins to open up a realisation of something quite unexpected in the call of faith in this God: what we might dare to name the call to *endure* the presence of God. For the faithfulness of this God – God's determination to be present as he wills, according to the implications of his promises, may not be for us comforting presence. We might recall here the extraordinary confession of Job: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1.21).

That a God who takes away might be "blessed" is a proposal which gives us pause. Do the promises of such a God *help*?

I have said before, and we need often to be reminded, that the Scriptures are a polemical text. They are constantly engaged in debate with the ideas and events of their age, which debate takes place by shifting emphases, denying this and affirming that. It is the same when it comes to a theme like promise-making: how does the promise of God stack up? For promises are constantly being made to us. In Jeremiah's time the question of promise was somewhat reduced to that of potential, to what *looked* promising, to what made political sense in that dangerous political climate. For us today promises also abound, both potential and personal. Consider the promise implied in the ever-being-renewed stream of consumer goods presented to us: this new thing is quicker, easier, sexier, cheaper than what we have had before, and is not quicker, easier, sexier and cheaper just what we want? Such promises are familiar also

in the political sphere: if in government, we will do what the previous one has not: lowering taxes, increasing services and delivering a surplus by which even lower taxes and more services might result. And is not this just what we want?

And yet, from experience, we don't really expect these promises to be kept. If you have the iPhone N, you know that the N+1 is only a matter of time, promising *now* to do what the N didn't quite deliver. Political stance D is always followed by stance E, promising to deliver what A, B and C also promised but did not. The result of this is cynicism, distrust borne of disappointment that the promises have not been fulfilled. And are we not, as a society, increasingly cynical about promises which do not deliver? And those who no longer trust are less likely to commit themselves to be trusted – less likely to make promises – because where is it modelled that a promise which matters is finally and fully kept?

The truth is that promises are very difficult to keep. Even in those places where human faithfulness is sometimes most brilliantly illustrated – in the keeping of the marriage vow and of the promise which is implied in daring to bring a child into the world – even here we promise more than we can do, for we will finally “run out” on each other: we fall, we widow, we bereave, simply because we are mortal. Willy or nilly – whether we want them to or not – our promises are always limited.

The limitedness of our own capacity to make and keep promises casts the promise-making of God in a different light. That God might promise to be present, and that that presence might be one in judgement as in the time of Jeremiah, is still a faithfulness, still a promise-keeping. If we might be saddened or even suffer because God is present to us as judge, at least we cannot be cynical. Such suffering is not disappointment; it is simply God being God that we might, finally, learn to be ourselves.

There is much more to be said here than I've been able to pull together for this morning, and perhaps we can unpack this a little more in the weeks which remain with Jeremiah. But to bring the reflection on promise-making and faithfulness to a conclusion, we can consider the prime instance of God's promise-keeping as seen in the events of Easter and realised for us in the Eucharist. Here we see the failure of human promise-making met with God's faithfulness to his promise. Here, the shape of our failure – a body broken *by* us, blood spilled *by* us – is returned as broken *for* us, spilled *for* us. Here, as we turn away from God and the sky turns black, God turns towards us and the Son rises. In this we see that, for better or for worse, in sickness and health, God's word to us is, I will be with you always.

This being the case, whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, we know that he is ours, and we can be his.
