

**Pentecost 22**  
**20/10/2013**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Jeremiah 31:27-34**  
**Psalm 119:97-104**  
**Luke 18:1-8**

### **Coming to know ourselves**

---

“The parents have eaten sour grapes, but the children’s teeth are set on edge”. Or, perhaps in more contemporary terms, or the parents have eaten junk food, but the children are obese. With this proverb Jeremiah summarises the wry, ironic observation the sin of a few is too often visited “unfairly” on the many. This, Jeremiah declares, “they shall no longer say”. All shall suffer for their own failures; it will be the teeth of those who eat the sour grapes which will be set on edge. I expect that this declaration is largely acceptable to most modern ears, almost to the point of being passé. Have we not long operated on this moral assumption, desiring that justice be done in such way as the culpable pay and the innocent are left unmolested? As such, this part of our reading this morning would almost seem to be superfluous so far as our own moral sentiments go.

The second part of the reading apparently presents rather a different theme: the new covenant. A contrast is drawn between the covenant “which they broke”, and a new written-on-the-heart covenant. While the first part of the whole reading appeals to us for its morality, the appeal of this section on the new covenant is in its very newness, its promissory contrast in relation to the people’s current negative experience, and the assurance that the promise will be realised by God’s desire that it should happen. Put most simply, it is a word of hope for those feeling hopeless.

But what we might call the familiarity of these readings – our familiarity with the morality of sour grapes and our longing for the promised new covenant – tends to render the text voiceless, for there is nothing new here. We already know this stuff, even if it helps to be reminded of it from time to time.

But we can push further into the text by teasing out the significance of what Jeremiah declares will no longer be said among God’s people on account of the new thing God is doing: “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD” (v34). The important point is that this little slogan – “Know the Lord” – is the fundament of human argument. What binds together the first part of the reading with its moralism and the second, more seemingly theological section, is our struggles with each other. The exhortation “Know the Lord” which Jeremiah declares will no longer be heard is the substance of the dispute between “parent” and “child” on account of the sour grapes. When we argue with each other it is always on the basis of a presumed common ground which is not actually common: we seek to persuade each other that the other ought to be able to see why we are right: know the truth, know the rules, know the Lord. God is on *my* side, and if you “Knew the Lord” you would be able to see that. “Know the Lord” is the cry of the crusader as his sword cleaves the head of some frightened infidel. It is the last, quiet whisper in the heart of the young convert as she presses the button to detonate her backpack in a busy market place. In more the secular sphere, it is what Tea Party delegates are arguing as they hold the US to ransom, and what the US President declares straight back at them; it is what border

protection policy declares as it turns back the boats of now-designated “illegals”. “Know the Lord” – in whatever particular form, and thinking of whatever particular God – is something we say to others when apparently they do not know the Lord, do not know the law, do not know the rules for how we are to relate to each other, at least in our own estimate.

Now, to make all this a bit more interesting, consider the following re-working of the proverb Jeremiah has quoted: the Synod as invested, and the congregations pay. There are no few grim observations around the church at the moment along these lines. As the Synod and the wider church struggle with each other, the slogan behind pretty much all that is said is “Know the Lord”. This is not the explicit statement, of course. Explicitly it is argued: you must see that this is necessary and legal or, from the other side, you must see that this is so, so wrong.

The mantra from the Synod – correct so far as it goes – is that the divestments are necessary and legal because “we are all the Synod”. The problem of the debt is of a type and a scale that all will have to suffer for the errors of a relative few. This is how we are ordered. The mistakes which have been made could not have been made – the loans could not have been taken out – had we been ordered differently. Here “Know the Lord” means “Know the rules”: we all agreed to this set of relationships, and this crisis is one of its results. Who and how we are has gotten us into this predicament, and the same will have to get us out.

Of course, not many in the congregations have either known the rules or given them much heed. *And yet* the response from the pews and pulpits to the crisis is of the same type: Know the Lord, or know the law, although it is now a different law or set of rules, something along the rules of fair play. The calls for accountability and a kind of blood-justice are a call that the moral point of the first part of the reading apply: no longer shall the children die for their parents’ sin, but the only the parents themselves.

At the same time, the Synod leadership seems to have sought to balance its enacting of the law with “grace” by presenting to the wider church prayers and reflective resources for pastoral use in worship and congregational meetings which have simply not had the ring of truth about them. The intention has apparently been to direct the church to “Know the Lord” in this situation by directing us to a Lord who merely consoles. Our current situation is treated as something akin to a natural disaster in which there is no guilt but only suffering, so that in theological reflection on the whole catastrophe we have effectively been served all Lamentations and no Jeremiah: not the Lord who judges and forgives but only the Lord – if there is such a one – who consoles, whose faithfulness is “new every morning” (Lamentations 3.22f) but whose judgement is not.

We all sense this untruth, of course. Our sense for the untruth manifests in calls for an accounting but, more deeply, these calls have to do with the absence of justice and the absence of the God who judges. In terms of what we have seen in our travelling with Jeremiah, there is no new covenant without Babylon. Any new start which does not give full and critical account of what has happened before the covenant is promised is not truth but sentimentality.

The point here is not so much the need to bringing the Synod and its processes to account, or even to lay all the blame on head office. The more important task of getting to a clear statement of the situation in which we find ourselves, for there is much confusion on account of the sour grapes, a lot of “Know the Lords” being thrown around, a lot of moral charges being heaped up against each other.

In the midst of all this we begin to see that, whatever Jeremiah’s new covenant is all about, it cannot be just a “God thing”. The writing of God’s law on our hearts is not just about a new kind of intimacy between God will have with us but also about a new way in which we will related to each other. Whatever the moral order and the “new covenant” are, they involve the dissolution of inter-personal strife. The promise of a new covenant is a promise which meets the situation in which so many “Know the Lords” must be said and yet none of them helps. We can say that in its current situation the whole of the Synod desperately needs the reality of this new covenant. How tragic for the church and also for its gospel, should we go through all this and come out much the same as before, with just more “Know the Lords” – more regulation, more oversight, more risk management.

In the face of this demoralising possibility, we model the truth of any new covenant with this God in the Eucharist: “*This* do for the remembrance of me”. Whatever the Eucharist is, it is not sentimental. It enacts God’s forgiveness by telling the truth about the path trodden to that forgiveness. And so at the heart of the sacrament are the ghastly signs of a broken body and spilled blood. We’re prone to be a bit squeamish about all that these days and to want to moderate the cannibalistic imagery (on the assumption, of course, that we are not already in many ways consuming each other). But we need to be reminded that the clang of hammer on nail is just another statement of that which will no longer need to be said: “Do you see now, Jesus? Die, and know the Lord”. To participate in the Eucharist is to have passed judgement on Jesus, to have required that *he* “know the Lord”, and to be judged ourselves for this wrong call. And so the body and the blood are placed at the very centre, for the forgiveness only has weight as it reveals the depth of the brokenness, as it tells us who we are and what this God can make of even that.

“No longer shall they...say to each other, ‘Know the LORD’” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest”. With this we come to a kind of closure on our readings from Jeremiah over these last 2 months. We began with God’s declaration to Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (1.5). It was a word specific to Jeremiah but through Jeremiah’s preaching we are all shown to be known by this God, intimately, as the text says this morning: I was your husband, “knowing” you with all the intimacy that Adam knew Eve (31.32).

With the promise of a new covenant, however, we hear not just that we are known, but that we ourselves will know God. “For *now* we see through a glass, darkly; but *then* face to face: *now* I know in part; but *then* shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13.12 KJV).

The new covenant is that we shall know God, for we have not as yet: the righteous judge who sets right, sets free, who knows, and loves, and forgives, and heals. In this, we shall know ourselves, loved, forgiven, free.

For this promise and the will and power of God to realise it, all thanks and praise be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

\*\*\*