

**Lent 5B**

**28<sup>th</sup> March, 2009**

Jeremiah:31-31-34; John 12:20-33; Heb 5:5-10; Ps 119: 9-16

*A New Heart*

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There is a conversation, from this morning's readings, that bounces across six centuries between the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah and Jesus. This conversation still speaks to us some 2,000 years later. Both speak of a new relationship with God being offered to all. Jeremiah calls out about a new covenant, God's Law being written within the hearts of God's people, and Jesus responds with words about the necessity of dying before new life – fruitful, abundant and eternal life – can spring forth in our hearts.

How can this come about? How can we participate in God's promise of new relationship with us, of this establishment of God's life in our hearts?

Jeremiah was fed up with the unfaithfulness of the Hebrew people of Judah: people who were not keeping God's laws and who did not want to pay any attention to the voice of God's true prophets. Living some 600 years before Christ, Jeremiah lived through the conquering of Judah by Babylon, which then began the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon and the destruction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. His anguish was over the inevitable fate of a people who continually refused to adhere to God's Law; who treated their covenant relationship with God very lightly. Whilst his words spell out the gloom and doom that was to come for the Hebrew people, at the same time he heralds hope for the future, a future built on a new sort of relationship with God, on forgiveness and on a new way of living the Law written on their hearts.

It was a common theme of the prophets that the honouring and obeying of the Law needed to flow from the heart. The heart was considered to be the place of all the processes of one's inner self – feelings, thinking, the will.

Jeremiah's vision takes this further: instead of being written on stone tablets and being about external observances, God's Law would be *living* within people's hearts. This new sort of relationship with God would be one where everyone would *know* him – be intimately related with him, rather than knowing *about* him. And it would be unconditional, unlike the old Covenant and Law. This was a movement away from following God in a legalistic, rules-based, head-centred way, to actually having God dwelling within, in a holistic, whole-of-being way.

Now, **what is Jeremiah saying to us, to God's people today?** With the sort of Biblical and theological knowledge we have, we might all say "Oh, yes. *Jesus* is the new covenant, he replaces the Law; he is the new Temple, the new heart and location of faith; it's through Jesus that we have new life, new relationship with God. He lives in us; His spirit dwells in us, in our hearts..." and so on. Those sorts of statements are theologically rich sets of propositions that we can acknowledge in a head-knowledge sort of way; that

we can often deep down know that we believe, but perhaps without fully understanding them. The translation from head to heart doesn't always happen easily. But what does that actually mean for us as we live our lives?

You see, there's a bit of a worrying gap here: It seems we're not much better at consistently living how God wants us to than the Israelites were in Jeremiah's time, even with God's Spirit within us. It isn't all plain sailing, it isn't easy, and it seems like the promise of a new heart –of God dwelling in the very centre of our beings - doesn't always match the reality.

To deal with this problem, we need to dig a little deeper into Jeremiah. We see that before this new covenant would ever come into being, Jerusalem would be conquered and the Temple – which was the old heart of the faith of the Hebrew people - would be destroyed. Commentators on Jeremiah suggest that Jeremiah's message is that restoration, the new, could not come into being without the old being destroyed first. For Jeremiah, the death of the old heart is necessary for the creation of the new. And we can take this message at several different levels: in Jeremiah's time, the physical heart of the faith – the Temple building - needed to be destroyed and the people taken into exile before God was taken seriously again; for Jesus, this meant the destruction of his body – his death – had to happen before new life became possible.

And what about for us? How might this be true for us, this assertion that the death of the old heart is necessary for the creation of the new? Here we need to consider the Gospel reading for today. Jesus is talking about his death and what it means to follow him. “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me.....”.

As we've been hearing persistently through this Lenten season, here is yet another call about dying to self; this paradox about losing our lives in order to gain real life. *The crunch: while ever we hold on to the old priorities of our lives, the old motivations, the old ways of seeing things, old and harmful habits, there isn't sufficient space or permission for God to create and develop the new in us.* This doesn't just mean beginning to behave in new and different, more God-shaped ways, it means following where Jesus goes, exposing ourselves to the same sorts of betrayals and pain; following him to the cross before resurrection and new life is possible. This also means – in our everyday life - letting go of things like old ideas, old sets of beliefs, fears, old markers of self identity. Being open to the new. It also means letting go of old grievances, of long-held grudges and refusals to forgive, of animosities and bitterness. That's not easy –even though such things can cause us harm and unhappiness, they can be so entrenched we can fail to see them as contrary to Christian living. As sin. It's not easy to do this letting go – there can never be instant transformation.

What happens is a bit like this: along the way, through our life and faith journeys, as we intentionally open up our inner selves – our thoughts, our attitudes, our hurts – our hearts – to God, it's like having a light shining into places that have been closed up and are dark. That's God's light and the work of his Spirit, making visible things that need attention. Because we're complex human beings with years of life and experiences – many of which have been painful and awful - we all have lots of doors in those inner places that are closed – maybe even some that have been wall-papered over and cast out of conscious memory, and maybe some that we fear will cause great pain in the opening.

But it's up to us to open those doors. God will not intrude where he's not invited. Mind you, he may well stand at the door and knock. His desire is for us to have a new heart, with himself at the very centre of our lives, for us to be living with all the abundance of life he can give.

There's more than just believing going on here, this is going deeper than our heads, this is reaching right into us, allowing real change. This work calls for intention and action on our parts, even if at times it's just the action of being willing to allow God to go to work in us. And the more we jettison, the more room there is for good cargo rather than baggage; the more God's spirit is able to work in us.

So there's death and there's life happening here – death in our willingness to surrender, to follow Jesus in letting go of –losing- what has constituted our life, and there's a new relationship and new *life* – abundant and eternal - in opening ourselves to God, in trusting God that he will provide the courage and support in his resurrection business of establishing his life in our hearts.

Are you willing to give God a go in this? All it takes to start the process is a simple prayer: *“Lord, I'm willing; or at least, I think I'm willing. I want to be free. I want to let go of the baggage so there's more room for your life. Help me, please. Amen”*