

Sermon for 17th March 2024, 5th Sunday of Lent, Year B.

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Sermon

I don't often preach directly on the Old Testament, but sometimes the text grips onto you tightly and won't let go until you've at least made an attempt to listen to what it's trying to say. Our reading today from the book of the prophet Jeremiah is one of those passages.

Jeremiah was one of the four major Old Testament prophets alongside Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. He lived during the 7th and 6th centuries before Christ, and his words reveal his increasing frustration with the leaders of the people of Judah during that time.

Admittedly, Jeremiah is predominantly, and infamously, a gloomy prophet. In the writings of Isaiah, you can find hope for the future, especially among the many passages that foreshadow the arrival of Jesus, but Jeremiah spends almost all his time warning the Jews of the calamities to come, because of their persistent breaking of the covenant with God, and their failure to obey the law of justice and mercy.

Eventually, of course, the warnings of catastrophe do indeed come to pass. Babylon invades and overthrows Jerusalem, levelling its walls, destroying the temple, and hauling its highest-ranking inhabitants away to be servants and slaves in Babylonia. Not only had the people lost power, prestige, and freedom, but they also lost the twin symbols of God's faithfulness – the temple and the king. It was as if they had lost God himself.

Jeremiah tries to teach his people that God's faithfulness is nevertheless intact. It's not God's fault that all this is happening to us, he says; it's *our* fault for not living up to the laws that God gave us through Moses; we were supposed to become a kind, generous, and merciful people, a blessing to each other and to all other nations around us.

But now, since that judgement had come, Jeremiah's words finally turn from condemnation to hope. Chapters 30 and 31 are sometimes called 'the Book of Comfort'. Their chief claim is that despite the Old Covenant having been broken, God will now make a New Covenant, which will be much better than the last. Instead of the covenant being based in keeping strict behavioural rules which everyone failed at, the law will instead be written on people's hearts. Unlike Isaiah's promise of a coming messiah who will fix everything for us, Jeremiah dreams of a far more intimate relationship with God that everyone participates in, from the least to the greatest.

Under the Old Covenant, so long as you visibly kept the rules, it didn't really matter what your motivations were. The law didn't transform the heart, it only spoke to how you must act in public. So, you could be the most miserable, selfish, cruel person imaginable, but if you made the appropriate sacrifices and kept yourself pure from contact with the unclean, then the rules said you were one of God's chosen.

Conversely, you could be kind, loving, and generous with everything you had, but if you failed to make the proper sacrifice because you were too poor, or you breached the purity and food laws and and so on, then it really didn't matter, the Old Covenant law was going to exclude and punish you.

What Jeremiah is promising instead is a new covenant between God and his people rooted in the motivations of our hearts, and a new sense of unconditional belonging. No one will need to teach each other saying 'know the Lord', because everyone will know him through their own experience.

But did this ever come to pass? Did Jeremiah's prophecy come true? Are we living in those days?

In the case of Jeremiah's people, some of them did return to Jerusalem, decades after their exile, but what awaited them was no egalitarian utopia. In fact, their leaders pretty much doubled down on all the rules and restrictions of the Old Covenant. They rebuilt the temple, reinstated all the sacrifices and priesthood, reimposed the strictest interpretation of the Law and purified their nation by banishing all the foreigners, including those they had married. The returning people passionately rededicated themselves to obeying the Law, but it was still the rigid law of the rulebook, not the gentle law of God's love in their hearts.

But even if Jeremiah's prophecy was not immediately fulfilled during the return from exile, surely it was fulfilled in Christ – and especially in his promise of the Holy Spirit poured out on everyone after Pentecost? What could be closer to Jeremiah's prophecy of complete forgiveness for our sins and complete knowledge of God's law in our hearts than the Christian understanding that we receive the Holy Spirit at baptism?

And yet, if we are honest, we must surely admit that we are still not quite there. So many churches of every denomination are still rooted in rule-following and fitting-in, and not in a shared, life-changing, experience of God's love for us.

Admittedly, from a religious leaders' perspective, rule-based religion is much easier to manage than one where everyone has felt God's presence guiding them within their own hearts. This is why in the Bible, the prophets are almost always in conflict with their country's leaders; and the same, of course, still happens today.

So, we might start to think of this inner transformation as what theologians call an 'eschatological promise' – something that is partially realised in the here and now, but which will only find its fullest and truest fulfilment in the future. God's

promise is true now, but also 'not yet'. And the role of a faithful people is to live in hope, and with longing.

The very clever theologian Jurgen Moltmann reminds us that through God's promises this longed-for future exerts its influence on the present. If we're yearning to experience the fullness of God's presence and love, the knowledge that it is coming begins to change us now, to make us more receptive, more hopeful, more authentic and open-hearted, less focussed on hiding our true selves just to fit in. We gradually become like whatever we fall in love with.

Having the love of God written in our hearts is the essence of human freedom. It's the freedom to act spontaneously, knowing that our actions will reflect God's love within us. It's the freedom to be who we truly are, knowing that our true character is what is most pleasing to God, far surpassing anything the rigid old law could ever squeeze out of us.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord. But if we truly desire it, there's no reason to believe that they're not already here.