

St. Brandon's 10.15am

21 March 2021

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

John 12: 20-33

Lent 5 Passion Sunday

The prophet Jeremiah lived in the 620s BC. From a priestly family, he was schooled in the Jewish faith, trained in the prayers and practices from an early age. He knew well how God had rescued humanity, through Noah, from the flood, and set his rainbow in the sky as the sign of his covenant never again to flood the earth. He knew the story of Abraham and Sarah, called to be the founders of God's people, a new nation, through the child of their old age, and of Jacob and his sons, the 12 tribes of Israel, who became slaves in Egypt.

Then Jeremiah knew and celebrated the Passover, the great rescue from Egypt, retold and remembered at the festival every year. He knew about the exodus, Moses leading the people through the red sea to safety, and the years of wandering in the wilderness which followed. Like all Jews he knew the law of Moses, the ten commandments and the guidelines for living laid out in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

All of this was the first Covenant between God and his people, but through the generations and centuries the people of Israel repeatedly failed to keep it, and suffered the consequences. Much of the book of Jeremiah describes these failures, the

horrors which they will face, the consequences of abandoning God and no longer worshipping him. Those of us who read Morning Prayer each day have been wrestling with Jeremiah for a few weeks now, chapter by chapter: it is a solemn and salutary read. So much so, of course that the term 'a Jeremiah' has become a by word for a prophet of doom.

And what do we do with *them*? We call them extreme, vilify or ignore them because they upset our plans and priorities, the largely self-centred and hedonistic lifestyle we have chosen.

But in this past year, we have learned that it may be wise to listen to the voices of doom, to take heed and live differently, for the sake of others and to avoid the destruction at our door...

As the grim anniversary of the first lockdown comes round, I suspect none of us is in the same place, mentally, emotionally or spiritually as we were a year ago. So much of what made up the old fabric of our lives has been ripped to shreds,

For so many, that includes harsh loss of life, or health, separation from loved ones, many months of stress and pressure in work and family life, taking its toll and testing us to the core.

We relate to the psalmist who wrote, in psalm 62:

*How long will you assail a person,
will you batter your victim, all of you,
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?*

We may encounter the news with dread and be horrified by the actions of others: as the psalm continues:

Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence.

They take pleasure in falsehood:

they bless with their mouths but inwardly they curse...

But may we who follow Jesus Christ, remember that, whatever situations surround us, fears we face or losses we bear, we can say with the psalmist

For God alone my soul waits in silence,

for my hope is from him.

He alone is my rock and my salvation,

my fortress, I shall not be shaken.

After that rather longer than usual prelude, let's turn now to the passage from Jeremiah which Gillian read us this morning.

We read it alongside the gospel on this passion Sunday because it prophesies the new covenant which Christ's passion and resurrection will establish. God's words through Jeremiah describe the incredible truth of the new covenant:

'I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God and they will be my people.'

God's law is the expression of all that is good and loving in how we relate to him, his world, ourselves and one another. It's about justice and compassion, mercy and grace, about living our best lives, as those made in God's image with an incredible capacity to love and be loved.

It's about God's unbreakable and eternal love for his people, and how, though this new covenant, we will be enabled to love God and others, for it will be a covenant of relationship, not rules, and of forgiveness. As v 34 says:

No longer shall they teach one another or say to one another, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.'

That's the new covenant. And God's response to humanity's failures, to the breaking of the old covenant, is to send his son to establish this New Covenant, which s will be for everyone 'the least to the greatest', linking it directly to today's gospel.

The passage we heard comes straight after John's description of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem – Palm Sunday, where we will be this time next week. It begins with some Greeks- non Jews- who are intrigued by the crowds and want to see Jesus. So they approach Philip, who has a Greek name and lives In Bethsaida, a

Greek Jewish town. This, by the way, is the same Philip who later met and baptised an Ethiopian official on the road out of Jerusalem- Philip connects to those who might be viewed as 'foreigners'- what a key gift that is.

Jesus' answer to their enquiry is momentous.

'The hour has now come ', he says, 'For the Son of Man to be glorified.'

Throughout the gospel, Jesus has been saying that the hour, his hour, has *not* yet come, that it's *not* time yet, but now, with the arrival of these Greeks, it is here.

Jesus describes figuratively the death which lies ahead of him, through which life will come, and that all who follow him will be called to walk the road he is about to take- what we might now call the way of the cross. In words which are reminiscent of how he is described in Gethsemane in the other gospels, he agonises over the choice before him:

Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say- Father save me from this hour? Then he chooses:

No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father glorify your name.

There follows a voice from heaven, - and remember the Greeks can hear this as well as the Jews- God says:

'I have glorified it and will glorify it again.'

And how typical of human beings that at this moment of divine revelation they start arguing about whether it's real, or thunder, or an angel speaking to him...

Jesus tells them it is a message for them, not for him, that judgement is about to come and power of Satan, 'the ruler of this world' will be driven out.

They, who are gathered in Jerusalem for the celebration of the Old Passover, will see all this come into being, the New Passover lamb will be sacrificed on the cross, and his blood will seal the New Covenant, made not only for the Jews, but for all peoples, tribes, and nations. As Jesus tells them,

When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself'

Let us take these words with us into the coming weeks.

This week as we mark a year of global pandemic with lament, reflection and prayer, next week when we travel together through Holy Week towards the cross.

Let us count the cost to the new covenant, in the shedding of Christ's blood, and let us lay hold of the hope of the new covenant as we know ourselves, in and through Christ, to be God's people, loved, forgiven and free.

Amen.