

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent – 18 March 2018

Readings: Jeremiah 31, 31-34
Psalm 51, 1-13
John 12, 20-33

We have arrived at the last Sunday of Lent, and I hope that you have not deprived yourselves of too many good things over the last few weeks. There are so many difficult and challenging things going on in the world that I think a little biscuit or a little cake from time to time is quite acceptable to make ourselves feel better. And it has struck me this year more than usual how the seriousness of Lent and the events we are leading up to after Lent, which it is quite easy to think of as gloomy and depressing, are somehow counter-balanced by the world around us awakening from winter. One can't help but notice the increased activity in the garden, the first pushing shoots, even finding the first spider of the year under my sink. All this activity goes on year by year whatever we do. However hard we try and mould nature to our benefit, it somehow carries on regardless.

Or does it? Only the other day a report came out showing how microscopic particles of plastic have invaded even bottled water; indeed, there is apparently more in bottled water than in most tap water. What are we doing to the world? What are we doing to ourselves? The fact is that we don't know, and we didn't bother to think through the implications of what we have done. This is such a common way for humans to behave. Lots of individual decisions are taken which seem individually small but then they all add up to a potential catastrophe because no-one has thought about the big picture; what is sometimes called the law of unintended consequences. For many, perhaps most of us, what goes on in the wider world, why we persist in self-destructive behaviour, individually or as nations, all seems a bit of a mystery. We all have some concept of right and wrong yet there seems to be a collective amnesia when it comes to trying to behave in ways that are less selfish and more responsible, a lack of recognition that all our small actions add up globally to one big result.

This is nothing new; we see it running through the whole of the Hebrew Bible as the people of Israel, God's specially chosen people, constantly fall away from faithfulness to God and fail to live up to the covenant that God established with Abraham and renewed with Moses. In our reading from Jeremiah we hear that God wants to make a new covenant which will be different. The old covenant was essentially expressed through the Israelites' leaders; their kings, prophets and priests. The new covenant is to be written on everybody's heart; everybody will know God themselves. It will not be mediated through a priesthood. This is good news but it comes after a series of disasters which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and the exile of the people to Babylon. Jeremiah saw this as God's punishment for Israel's lack of faith, it's constant returning to older false gods, all those small individual steps that probably seemed not too bad at the time but added up to disaster. Although Jeremiah could not have foreseen exactly how God would bring this new covenant about, and would probably have had some difficulty in seeing it in Jesus, he did realise that a new start had to be made if the people of Israel were to return to their homeland.

Psalm 51, the archetypal Lent psalm I always think, is a plea to become part of that new covenant. It's not difficult to imagine that when the Jewish people recited these words, they felt that it referred to the people as a whole as well as each individual within the nation. After such a long history of ignoring or complaining about God, what else could they do except throw themselves on God's mercy and compassion, and ask him to give them new hearts and right spirits. And not just new hearts. Remember the line that goes 'you desire truth in the inward

being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.' It is not enough to be seen to be doing the right thing; we have to believe the right thing in our hearts all the time, otherwise our commitment to God will not be real. Like the Pharisees who prayed in public but could not see that their ostentatious behaviour made their unthinking self-righteousness (like ignoring the wounded traveller in the story of the Good Samaritan) ever more hypocritical.

And our gospel reading brings those two elements of the new covenant and our response to that together in the person of Jesus. This may not seem like much of a story but for John, the gospel writer, it marks a crucial turn of events. For the first time, someone other than his own people have expressed an interest in finding out more about Jesus. We aren't told who these Greeks are or why they want to see Jesus, but Jesus himself realises that it signifies that his wider mission to the whole world, not just to the people of Israel, has begun, and that it has to start with his own death.

When Jesus says 'The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified' he is recognising that he must go through death in order to bring about the new covenant that God has promised. This is also the meaning behind his comment that the single grain of wheat must die to bear fruit – he is that single grain of wheat. He cannot help but be troubled at the thought of what he is going to have to go through. He is after all human as well as the son of God and he knows that there will be deep pain and suffering before it is all over, but he also knows that there will be a glorious end and he is determined to see it through so that that end is achieved. And whilst Jesus is thinking about all that, he still has time to think of his followers then and in the future, and assures them - and us - that God will honour those who keep their side of the covenant.

Then there is the mysterious voice and the people standing round are uncertain what it is. As happened so often, it is as if they don't want to accept the evidence that Jesus has a relationship with God that is fundamentally different to that of other prophets (like Jeremiah). Jesus' response is to say that the voice has spoken to show them precisely that, and that as a result of what is about to happen, his own death and resurrection, there will be a fundamental change in the world, the power of evil will be broken, and all people, not just the Jewish people, will be drawn into the new covenant foreseen by Jeremiah. Jeremiah is the only prophet who refers to a new covenant, so when Jesus himself refers to it at the Last Supper, we can be fairly certain that he is referring back to Jeremiah's prophecy. So yet again we can see the close intertwining of the the Hebrew Bible with Jesus's life and the gospel story which is why it is such a mistake to write it off with derogatory terms like the Old Testament and think it is not relevant to us.

And that I think is the theological point I want to make today. It is not always easy to see why we have to sit through a reading from a text written before Jesus' own time, and a psalm, and why we have to do this in almost every service, whether a eucharist or not. Why don't we have just the gospel reading? And it is true that if we just hear the occasional bite-sized chunk, taken out of context, full of unpronounceable names and the bloodthirsty deeds of ancient kings about whom we neither know nor care, it doesn't seem very relevant. Yet today's selection - Jeremiah foretelling the new covenant, the psalm in which we plead to be allowed to be part of that covenant and Jesus' arrival at the point in history when the covenant will be enacted shows that it does make sense, that everything written before Jesus, however bizarre and mythical it might seem, is in some way part of the unfolding story of God's untiring efforts to convince us to listen. And we are just so deaf. Jeremiah himself was imprisoned and badly treated because the king and priests did not take kindly to his prophecies that their behaviour would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem, and as we heard, some of those who were with Jesus and heard the voice from heaven did not even recognise it as a voice but thought it was thunder. In the same way, so many people today cannot see the bigger picture, the vision of God's kingdom based on faith, hope and love. We are here today, I hope, because we do believe in that vision, because we

do see the bigger picture but we are only human. We have lots of other things to think about, we get tired and distracted, so we need to take time out, pick up our Bibles and try and read it in a systematic way. There is lots of guidance available, there are daily reading programmes which explain what you are reading as you go along, and we are hoping that soon we will extend our own periodic study groups like Pilgrim to become permanent regular gatherings where we can look at the Bible together.

So as the darkness of winter draws back, and the new shoots of spring burst out, let's try and revitalise our own faith by renewing our acquaintance with God's word as revealed in Holy Scripture.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, we thank you for the gift of your holy word. May it be a lantern to our feet, a light to our paths, and strength to our lives. Take us and use us to love and serve all people in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**