

The new covenant

In the last week before his crucifixion, one day, after he'd been teaching, when Jesus and the disciples were leaving the temple to go to the Mount of Olives, one of the disciples remarked to Jesus how the temple was made of massive stones and had many magnificent buildings – and Jesus responded “Do you see all these great buildings?... “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”” (Mark 13:2)

I'm pretty sure that the disciple wasn't expecting that response. But later four of them came to Jesus and asked “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?” Not who's going to do it, or why is it going to happen, but when.

‘When?’ is such an important question for people. For us. We have this desire to know when things will happen. How long until? Can I get this done before that happens? And so often in our lives we don't know when, and we have to live with the uncertainty. Patience is a fruit of the spirit, of course, but so often we find ourselves lacking.

We would like to know when, but we don't. It wouldn't be until AD70 that the temple was destroyed. I remember doing New Testament studies and asking my minister what the significance of the destruction being 30 something years after Jesus' prediction was. Phil, the minister, just struggled and said “I dunno”.

While we do not always know God's timing, we do know God's faithfulness. If God says it will happen, it will happen. And we have this wonderful assurance throughout the scriptures as we see what God has promised, happening.

And so we come to this morning's reading from the book of Jeremiah, and it begins:

“The days are coming”, declares the Lord...’

And this is a phrase that comes up several times in the book of Jeremiah, where God, through Jeremiah, assures his people of what will happen. Not what might happen, but what will happen.

In chapter 23 we read, “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,” (23:5)

In chapter 30 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, ‘when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity...’ (30:3)

Earlier in this chapter, “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will plant the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals. Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,” declares the Lord.’ (31:27-28)

And he continues into chapter 33, “The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. “In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land.’ (33:14-15)

Jeremiah has a gloomy reputation – in fact, he’s often referred to as “the weeping prophet” which is based on his wish to have a “fountain of tears” with which he might weep for the slain of his own people (9:1). But he was not simply prophesying gloom and doom for the people, he also cared for them – deeply. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, we read of his personal grief, anguish, and anger in being a prophet. For forty years. And in return he received little more than condemnation and hatred from those to whom he had been sent to prophesy to.

In the book of Jeremiah, we see God expressing his frustration and disappointment with his people because they have wandered away from the covenant relationship that had existed since in the time of Moses. God’s warnings to the people had become reality. Babylon had invaded, the Temple had been destroyed, and the survivors were taken into exile.

But despite Jeremiah’s gloomy reputation, as we have heard today, he also shares tremendous hope, hope for the future, hope that the people might not have been able to pin down to a specific date, but hope that was sure and certain. “The days are surely coming!”

In fact, chapters 30 through 33 of the book of Jeremiah are so poignant that they have come to be called “The Book of Comfort,” or “The Little Book of Consolation.” A kind of a book within a book.

Our reading today, is part of that book. Comfort for the people of Israel, and comfort for us – because what is promised to the people all those years ago, which we see fulfilled in Jesus, is there for us today.

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.” (31:31).

Jeremiah is the only Old Testament prophet to use the term “new covenant” – we know it well because it is used many times in the New Testament - At the last supper, Jesus said “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). Paul uses it in his letters to the Corinthians, and it is used several times in the letter to the Hebrews.

Sometimes in the Old Testament, the prophets refer to a coming “Everlasting Covenant” (Isaiah 55:3, 61:8, Jeremiah 32:40, 50:5; Ezekiel 16:60) , which speaks more to a renewal of the existing covenant between God and his people - the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

But here, Jeremiah, talks of a new covenant. A new covenant that is surely coming for the people.

We, today, know the story of the fulfilment of God’s plan in Jesus. We know that the Old Testament looks forward to Jesus’ arrival in history, we know that it prophesies his life and death and resurrection, and we know that those prophesies are confirmed in Jesus, but when we read the Old Testament we need to remember the original hearers – or indeed the

writers – didn't have that confirmation. In the context of today's Old Testament reading, Jeremiah and his audience didn't know what we know. They did not have our historical perspective, and nor did they have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them.

But Jeremiah lived and prophesied around 600 years before Jesus. From the reign of Josiah, king of Judah, until after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's Temple in 587 BC.

He was called when he was only a boy, he was called at a time when the country was in serious trouble. His career spanned a time of incredible catastrophe for the people of Judah. Jeremiah was called to speak while the Babylonians were invading Judah, burning Jerusalem, and carrying vast numbers of Jewish people into exile. Jeremiah was then one of a small remnant left in Judah, living in the midst of the rubble. The people who had been promised God's protection and deliverance found themselves in a place of desolation.

And so Jeremiah was called to lead Judah through a time of lament, through weeping and mourning, and to repentance. And in the midst of all the sadness, he revealed hope and promise for God's people. That even though the circumstances were terrible and everything suggested things were hopeless, Jeremiah and other prophets of the time proclaimed that God's people could still rejoice and praise God for his promises, even though they had broken the covenant. They assured the people that God would not remain angry, that God would be faithful to his people, and would restore them (cf. Lamentations 3:19-26, Habakkuk 3:16-19). They told the people that from death would rise new life, and also into a new relationship with God.

Jeremiah was given a proclamation to make: that God would initiate a new covenant with his people. His people had violated their existing covenant - they had bowed to the Canaanite gods Baal, Ashtoreth, Molech and others.

But even though the people weren't faithful to God, God was faithful to the people. Of course, there was a consequence to the people turning away from God: a terrible consequence – but not a permanent one. They were invaded and exiled and taken to the brink of destruction. But even as those things were happening, God spoke through the prophets, and spoke of mercy and compassion, redemption, and restoration.

God would not leave his people in the dark place they were in, but would open the way to reconciliation, and would ultimately redeem people, and begin a new – or renewed – relationship with his people.

And so, as we've heard this morning, Jeremiah reveals what this new relationship – this new relationship between God and his people – will be like.

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." The 'law' here isn't just a set of legal requirements. It's not simply the ten commandments. To the Jewish people, the law – the Torah – is the first five books of the Old Testament. Not all of that is commandments – most of it is simply the story of God and his people – in particular the story of Israel. So this promise of having God's Torah within them and on their hearts and minds isn't about them

learning the right thing to do and memorizing and obeying rules, instead, it's about knowing God and knowing God's promises and plans.

Jeremiah tells us what God promises: "I will be their God, and they will be my people." The new covenant is not a one way thing: We, together, are God's people. We are bound to one another. While we each have to make our own decision to follow Jesus, once we do that, we are not just individuals who follow Jesus, but we become part of something bigger than ourselves. God's people. Or, as Paul later puts it in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:12-13), the body of Christ.

We follow Jesus, together. We take up our crosses and walk together. Each of us has different gifts and uses them in different ways, but we work together. Being a Christian means being part of Christ's body, one piece of a larger whole.

Jeremiah goes on to say that God tells us "they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest." Those who have been going to church for a long time often take this for granted, or miss the significance of it. We get used to the words and the prayers and the declarations – "Yes, yes, God is revealed to us in Jesus!", and "Yes, yes, I have a personal relationship with Jesus".

But this is a profound idea. Take a moment to ponder it. God, the creator of all things, is knowable to you. God isn't this cosmic idea that we might be able to glimpse or contemplate if we do the right things, or if we make the right donations or if we say the right words, or fast or meditate in the correct way.

Instead: we can all know God. The greatest of us. The least of us. We can all know God.

God isn't unapproachable. Quite the opposite: God, in Jesus, chose to approach us! To enter into our world to make himself known to us.

For Abraham to know God and Moses to converse with God was different to what happened in the nations around them with their different gods and different faiths.

In other societies the idea was generally that you had to appease the gods. You wouldn't become a friend of Baal or Ashtoreth or Molech or any other 'gods' that they had. You couldn't know them. You might know about them, and you would do everything you could not to incur their wrath. But you would never enter into something that would be regarded as a 'relationship' with those gods.

But we get to know God. Not just know things about God. But have a relationship with God, just as we have relationships with each other.

The challenge for us is to realise that the new covenant is not somewhere off in the future, as it was for the people of Jeremiah's time, but that it has been delivered for us in Jesus. And having realised that, to embrace that covenant, to be part of that relationship with God.

We need to let God put his law within us, let him write it on our hearts – not simply to remember and follow God’s commandments, not simply to be good people, but to build our own relationship with God and with each other. To live as God’s people.

And it doesn’t matter what we can do, or what we have done, whether good or bad, because, in Jesus, we see and know the assurance that Jeremiah shared with the people of his time “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “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.

Amen