

Heart of Covenant

Sermon given by Rev Eddie Sykes at the Joint Covenant Service on 27 January 2019

The readings were: Deuteronomy 29:10-15; Jeremiah 31:31-34;

Romans 12:1-2; Mark 14:22-25

We read today from Jeremiah. A fascinating book to read – and not always easy – he uses words and phrases such as pluck up, pull down, destroy, overthrow, build and plant. Throughout much of the book Jeremiah tells the people over and over again that the troubled situation they experience is a consequence of their disobedience to God.

Jeremiah himself struggled with this, after experiencing his nation being overthrown, the city of Jerusalem destroyed and ransacked, the temple destroyed, and the people dispersed into Babylonia. It was a bleak experience.

We then see a change of mood, where the plucking up, pulling down, destroying and overthrowing are replaced by words of consolation and promise that God would relent of anger and return the people to their home. They would experience God's love in tangible ways, and would experience prosperity and joy.

Now those promises are pretty remarkable: joy; prosperity; going home; experiencing the love of God in a new and very real way. But there is even more!

Sounds a bit like one of those TV offers, where you are shown a product that will cost you £19.99, and just when you think that's it, they say, "But that's not all – there is even more", and they then offer some extras or double what you ordered all for the same price.

Here, Jeremiah offers a new covenant between God and his people: a new covenant that manifests God's forgiveness.

Such words push this covenant in a new direction. For it is not a recapitulation of the old, but something new – here God is



promising to heal them from the inside out. No longer is the covenant about outward experiences, on tablets of stone, but now it will be experienced in their hearts.

Remember – a covenant is an agreement between two parties. We can hardly say it is an agreement between two equal parties, as one party is God, and the other is you and me. A covenant involves promises made by the superior party that will be heeded by the inferior party, when they respond in accordance with whatever that agreement is.

But the thing here is that God will take responsibility even for the response from the people, the inferior party, and God will actually empower the people to uphold their end of the agreement.

So how does this affect us? It affects all those for who have found the old way of doing things falling short for them. They need to see something new, to experience something new, to have something new to hold on to.



Well . . . let me encourage you to look at this passage a bit more closely.

1 “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”

The external covenant at Mount Sinai was etched in stone – an ark was built to tight specifications to carry this covenant, sacrifices were spelled out in great detail – but now it will be engraved within the human heart.

In this context the word from which we translate ‘law’ can also mean ‘teaching’ or ‘instruction’ – it actually carries with it a sense of grace encouraging people, through this teaching to live in stability and harmony.

Augustine suggested that the law teaches us how to love. As the psalmist says: “*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.*” However, just like Jeremiah seems to sense, there is something in the idea of law that we tend to resist.

By writing this teaching on our hearts it is as if God is bypassing that resistance – it is like feeling the law of God, goodness and love of God deep within us.

We should, therefore, no longer need to look to external standards for realising how much we love God – for in this new covenant we, as it were, know truly how much we love God – or otherwise.

2 “I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

In this we are reminded that it is God who chooses to be our God – and not the other way around. God affirms us as his people, and likewise our response is to affirm by our love that we belong to God.

Remember when the ‘chosen people’ were trekking with Moses across the desert for 40 years – a lot of the time whining and

moaning, as God gradually licked them into shape. God blessed them with manna for the journey each day.

We might ask why didn’t God give them enough for an entire year, so they didn’t have to plead for it each day? In answer to this question, Rabbi Ben Jochai told the following story:

“Once there was a rich man who had a son to whom he promised an annual allowance. Every year on the same day, he would give his son the entire amount. After a while it happened that the only time the man saw his son was on that day when he came for his allowance. So, the father changed his plan and gave his son only enough for a day. Then when he came the next day, he would give him that day’s allowance. From then on, the father saw his son every day.”

As difficult as it may seem to grasp, God wants to see us daily – that is our part of the covenant, to see God daily – to show God that we are his people.

Each day we need to pray to God, to be with God, and ask – “*Lord give me what I need for today, help me to be your person today, help me to be faithful just for today.*”

And you know we will discover that as God’s people he gives us just enough joy, love, faith or grace for each day.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer when in prison wrote: “*I believe that God will give us the strength we need to help us resist in all the time of distress. But he never gives it in advance, lest we should rely on ourselves and not on him alone.*”

In a sense God doesn’t make us reservoirs able to store up great quantities of these attributes – he gives to us what we need each day.

He is our God - which also means that as we all belong to God – no one is more important than any other.

3 “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.”

The knowledge of God, this experience of the risen and ascended Christ by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit can be in each one of us – deep within each one of us.

This does not mean to say that teaching and preaching are redundant, but they are no substitute for experiencing the grace of God – that heart-warming experience.

John Wesley himself from all outward appearance looked as if he had faith sorted – but it was when he felt the ‘heart-warming’ experience that he was fully sorted. He experienced the peace and grace of God and knew.

It is also kind of saying that when everyone is on the same page – the ‘least’ and the ‘greatest’ – that this harmony and stability will be realized.

The new covenant makes us realize that in Christ we are ALL welcome to God’s grace, we can ALL know the Lord.

4 “I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”

And that truly is good news, that all of us can know the forgiveness and mercy of God in our hearts. It is one thing to be told that God can or will forgive our sins, but it is truly wonderful to feel that mercy and realize fully how much God wants to do a new thing in us and through us.

Remember: at the heart of this covenant is the grace and forgiveness of God. We may be weary of our inner turmoil, but we do not have to battle it out on our own – we can know the forgiveness of God, and that, whatever may be our past sins and shortcomings, God remembers them no more.

And the good news is that if we concentrate on meeting God each day we don’t need to worry about the future. C S Lewis in a sermon delivered at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford, at the outbreak of World War II said:

“A more Christian attitude, which can be attained at any age, is that of leaving the future into God’s hands. We may as well, for God will certainly retain it whether we leave it to him or not. Never, in peacetime or war, commit your virtue or your happiness to the future. Happy work is best done by the man who takes his long-term plans somewhat lightly and works from moment to moment “as to the Lord’. The only thing we are encouraged to ask for is our daily bread. The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or any grace received.”

This new covenant is a ‘today’ covenant. We can begin to realize Jeremiah’s words of hope and life in the days ahead when we trust and live to the Lord today.

The future as a place of promise is only so if we live that promise today – with God’s new covenant engraved on our hearts – God’s grace deep within us.

We only live that covenant binding us together, laden with forgiveness, when we make that conscious effort to forgive those who need to be forgiven and ask for forgiveness from those whom we’ve hurt, including God.

And so it is – we trust ourselves to the Lordship of Christ each day, and aspire to live each day faithfully to God. Amen.

The image used was found at the Pax Christi blog at this link: <https://tinyurl.com/y8rlu4ta>.