

Sunday 21st March 2021

(OT Jeremiah 31:31-34; NT Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 10:32-45)

'In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit'

Jeremiah is given a proclamation to make, that God will initiate a new covenant with his people. His people had violated their existing covenant. God had bound himself to his people as a husband is bound to his wife. But they had committed spiritual adultery- having relationships with idols and other religions and superstitions.

He will not leave his people in this dark place, but will make reconciliation possible, and create a new relationship.

The old covenant was between the Jewish people and Yahweh. In this old covenant, the Jewish people observed the ceremonial laws. The covenant between God and the Jews as they left Egypt was based on God's law and the people's promise of obedience to those laws. In contrast, the new covenant is no longer based on following tradition, the ceremonial laws and expected behaviours, but on the forgiveness of sins through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ: the old covenant is revealed in a new manner.

The NT teaches that the decisive fulfilment of the new covenant is finally achieved in the people who are 'in Christ'. The new kind of forgiveness is possible because he has made a once – and – for – all sacrifice for sin that makes all other sacrifices obsolete. It is a covenant that cannot end because it has been perfected by Christ.

In the scripture reading this morning we heard these words.....

I will make a new covenant.....It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors.

....he entered once for all into the Holy Place....not with the blood of goats and calves....but with his own blood.

...are you able to drink the cup that I drink?

What is this covenant which God made with their ancestors? Well the form it took is recorded for us. Let us explore it a little as we transition from the old to the new.....

There in the desert on their way home from captivity in Egypt they created an altar. It was created from twelve stones one for each tribe. An animal was slaughtered and its blood was drained off into two bowls. One bowl of blood was thrown over the altar thus symbolically given to God. The Moses read out the 'terms' of the covenant.....the agreement that was being made between God and the people.

It would be 'something' like the Ten Commandments.

He asked the people.....'Will you abide by these rules?'

They answered.....'All that God has spoken we will do and we will be obedient'.

Then Moses took the other bowl of blood and threw it over the assembled people.

The blood of one animal thus binding them together as one. God and people no longer separate but joined together in a solemn binding agreement.

But the covenant was not just ceremony. Behind the form was content.

So what was it to which they were giving their assent?

What they were agreeing to was a new way of life! They had been slaves in Egypt, They had been owned everything they did was prescribed for them. Others had ruled over them. But now they were on their way to a promised land in which they would be in control.

What sort of life style would they preside over there?

Would it simply be a 'mirror image' of what they had known in Egypt?

No! indeed not! It would be different!

During their years in the desert they had learned that there was another way to live with each other and with their God.

The refrain that 'ran through' all their dealings with God was.....'***It shall not be so with you as it was in Egypt***'. For them it would be different. It was that difference that they were celebrating when they made their covenant with God. That is what they were agreeing to.

They had to learn about the use of resources. In the desert it was hot during the day and cold during the night. They did not know where their next meal was coming from.

They were frightened. They said to themselves...'At least in Egypt we got the crumbs when everyone else had had their share. Here we get nothing. Let's go back!'

But Moses would have none of that. 'You stay where you are and see what God will do even in the desert'. And in the morning there was the manna on the ground.

They could not believe their eyes. Here was food in abundance.

Being a people who had been slaves they rushed out and gorged themselves and took as much as they could to **make sure they would have enough** for when they got hungry again.

It was then they had to learn the lesson. They had to learn they should take only enough for themselves they should leave the rest for others who need to eat as well.

If you take everything for yourself others will go hungry. If you take too much all that will happen is that it will 'go bad' in your hands. If you only take as much as you need it will be there again tomorrow.

That understanding of how to use resources became part of their understanding of the life-style which was to be theirs in the land to which they were going.

'You shall not take too much. That is how it was in Egypt. It shall not be so amongst you'. And so it was written into their law that when they were reaping a field they should not reap at the edges but leave that for the widow, the fatherless and the stranger. That is how it would be like with them.

In a similar manner they had to learn about the care of the elderly. 'Honour your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land which the Lord, your God gives you'.

How does looking after your mother and father ensure a long life?

Well! It was not a rule for children. It was a law for a community.

The usual rule in the world they inhabited was that tribes needed to have a certain amount of speed otherwise they would not get to the next water-hole before they or their flocks perished of thirst.

So the usual rule was that the elderly, (who became physically challenged), and could not move with the same speed as the rest they got left behind to die in the desert.

But what this people heard their God saying to them through Moses was... ***'It shall not be so amongst you. You shall take them with you, carry them is required'***. Then when your day comes and you are old then your children will carry you.

You will not have to die alone in the desert. Your days will be long in the land.

In the same way they were reminded that the institution of the Sabbath was to make them realise that life was not about owning and being owned but that at least once per week everybody and even the oxen in the field were free to live life according to their own rights and not according to the desires of those who thought they owned them. ***That is what it was like in Egypt when you were slaves but it shall not be so amongst you. With you it shall be different.***

Perhaps this understanding of a new life-style reached its peak with their understanding of the Year of Jubilee. Once in fifty years all land which had been bought or taken from others would be given back and society would begin again with each family sharing both the privilege and the responsibility for some of the land. Life is not about acquiring more and more until a few own everything and most have nothing.

It shall not be so amongst you.

So this was the covenant they had entered into. But it was not one they were able to keep. In spite of the religion they practiced they were not able to carry on into the life of their community the promises they had made to God.

In fact there were times when the practice of their religion seemed to 'get in the way' of seeing what God required of them.

We read in the book of Amos these words, *'I hate, I despise your religious festivals, your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them, Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs!but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream'. To the making of the many prayers I will not listen.*

We read in the book of Micah these words, 'Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? Has he told you O mortal what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? ***To do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God'***.

In the end it was Jeremiah who saw that such was the nature of God that he would go on offering his love for his people even if they kept on breaking the agreement they had made.

And so to the new..... God would offer them a new covenant. It would be written not on stone but on their hearts. ³⁴ ***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.***

Jeremiah proclaimed to the people of his time that the Lord would make a new covenant with them. The new covenant would not be like the old one when God gave them a set of rules to live by. Instead, the new covenant had to do with an internal motivation to be faithful along with a standing promise of forgiveness. Historically they were given the law, now they are given the freedom to live in the grace of God.

Computers have a function called “delete.” It allows you to eliminate a word, sentence or phrase. You can even delete an entire page, file or picture. When you press delete a message appears on the screen. It says, “Are you sure you want to delete this item?” You press “yes” and the item is deleted, but not really. It is simply sent to your recycle bin where it remains until permanently deleted.

When God forgives us it is final. As it says in Jeremiah, God no longer remembers our sins. They are forgotten, totally deleted. Unlike God, we struggle with absolute forgiveness. We forgive conditionally or “remember” because we don’t appreciate the value of unconditional forgiveness. We leave it in our recycle bins for future reference.

In the New Testament we these words..... The terms of this covenant are clear enough. ‘Can you drink the cup that I drink?’ ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognise as their rulers, Lord it over them. But it is not to be so amongst you...(that is what it was like in Egypt), but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the servant of all’.

On the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus took the cup, when they had finished their supper he said, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood’.

This time there was no altar but a cross, no animal slain but Christ himself. The blood did not have to be thrown over the altar it ran down the side.

What Jeremiah and Jesus gave were very comforting words to a dispirited and unfaithful group. In Jeremiah’s time the nation of Israel was in shambles. The temple did not exist. They were pondering over their identity. The disciples were also worried about their future, how they would survive without Jesus as their leader. They were feeling insecure and afraid of the overwhelming odds against them. Both groups were without hope.

The new covenant provides a different framework in which to live as people of the faith. It isn't about rules, liturgy, procedures and policies. It's about forgiveness. Forgiveness enables us to move forward, to bury the past, to say "Amen" to what was and live in the present. And the way we are to live in the present is to be people who can receive forgiveness on the one hand, and give forgiveness on the other. This is a new covenant unlike any other. It can't be purchased. It can't be borrowed. It can't be obtained by following some set of rules and principles. It can only be received.

So we are those who claim to be the 'children of the New Covenant'. That is the 'deal' we entered into, the agreement we have made.

This is what the Apostle Paul says, 'Every time you eat the bread and drink the cup you show the Lord's death till he come'.

We show it not only when we are in church taking communion but also in our homes, on the streets, in our relationships with our family, our neighbours and our colleagues in the work-place.

To live in the new covenant, to live a new and improved life, we must fully accept the forgiveness God gives and let go of the past. Forgiveness is not a temporary condition but a permanent change. God forgives, God forgets and God wants us to forgive with a big heart.

It is an enormous promise that God makes. It is an enormous responsibility we carry. Jesus said, 'Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind, that first and then love your neighbour as you love yourself'.

That is how it should be with us. We are children of the New Covenant!

Amen