

Year B

Jeremiah 31:31-34

It has been said that any argument has two sides, and they're usually married to each other.

I read the following poem recently:

“A horse can't pull while kicking.
This fact we merely mention.
And he can't kick while pulling,
Which is our chief contention.
Let's imitate the good old horse
And lead a life that's fitting;
Just pull an honest load, and then
There'll be no time for kicking.”¹

¹ Bits & Pieces, May 1990, p. 7.

The relationship between God and humanity had gone horribly wrong despite the fact that they were in a kind of marriage relationship, through promises made by God and Israel, where both parties had made covenant promises. God was emphatic that he had kept his promises and that humanity was unfaithful and the majority of humanity was also quite sure that God had not kept faith with them. And so in this situation of marital breakdown a critical crossroads appeared. Was the relationship doomed and a divorce imminent, as the prophet Hosea had lamented, or was there going to be a

breakthrough that would bring reconciliation? God made the breakthrough move and humanity, through Israel, received the new covenant. It sounds wonderful and it is but as in every marriage a lot of work needs to be done.

In 1992 the Queen gave a famous speech at Guildhall to mark the fortieth anniversary of her accession to the throne. She said;

“1992 is not a year on which I shall look back with undiluted pleasure. In the words of one of my more sympathetic correspondents, it has turned out to be an 'Annus Horribilis'. I suspect that I am not

alone in thinking it so. Indeed, I suspect that there are very few people or institutions unaffected by these last months of worldwide turmoil and uncertainty. This generosity and whole-hearted kindness of the Corporation of the City to Prince Philip and me would be welcome at any time, but at this particular moment, in the aftermath of Friday's tragic fire at Windsor, it is especially so.”²

Likewise, 587BC turned out to be an *annus horribilis* for Israel. To a much greater extent than the fire at Windsor, the razing of the Temple in Jerusalem and the taking

² <https://www.royal.uk/annus-horribilis-speech>

away in chains of King Zedekiah sunk the people to new depths of despondency. The Temple represented in physical form the presence of the Lord God whose ambassador, the Messiah like one, was the King. Here both pillars of their covenantal faith were pulled down and they were left with nothing except fading memories of past glories. And whose fault was that? We're back to the same old problem again.

On a graveyard on the east coast of the United States the following words are inscribed:

“Sacred to the memory of Elisha Philbrook and his wife Saran.

Beneath these stones do lie,
Back to back, my wife and I!
When the last trumpet the air shall fill
If she gets up, I'll just lie still.”³

Whose fault was this critical breakdown between God and Israel? The Babylonians were making a mockery of Israel's independence and so surely the all-powerful God had let them down? Of course, there are always two sides to the story and God had his, and ultimately his won through, not by force of argument, but by loving compassion. There is a great difference between knowing about God and knowing

³ Sargentville, Maine from *The Last Word*, 1979, quoted in *Reader's Digest*, October 1980.

God and that explains the basis of this incredible covenant renewal that was prophesied by Jeremiah. Instead of the law being written on stone tablets it would be written on the human heart. Remember the unilateral nature of the first covenant with humanity as the rainbow stretched across the waterlogged earth. God had made and sealed the promise and regardless of human response or a lack of it that covenant would remain unbroken forever. The subsequent covenants with Abraham and Moses demanded covenant loyalty of people and their subsequent failure left it all in tatters.

Instead of blaming and dwelling on fault, God moved to re-establish the basis of the covenant that it would be made new. No longer would the relationship be maintained by knowledge but instead by inspired obedience. It is not enough to know that God exists and loves us, we must now live in that love, following him. There is an almost utopian-like feel to the Jeremiah text. No longer will there be any need for teaching. Really, it would make the likes of me redundant! No longer will their sins be remembered; no more consequences. Really, is that what we experience every day? We

read this and we wonder if we know what this is like: surely these words have been fulfilled in the Messiah, Jesus Christ? Yet, we know we are not there. We know his law is written in our hearts and yet we do no better than the people of old as we struggle to live with integrity before our God. And we, so easily, descend to the blame game again. Whose fault is it? It's interesting that when the New Testament writers refer to the new covenant they do so in the main with reference to a meal that Jesus shared, and shares, with his disciples. The body and blood of Jesus shared through bread and

wine bring the benefits of the new covenant, the heart and soul covenant, to the people. When we actively remember his sacrifice, he remembers our sin no more and he points us forward to the fulness of the kingdom. You see, the new covenant can only be understood and lived from our perspective as the future comes forward to meet us in the present. Jurgen Moltmann, the great German theologian wrote in his book *Theology of Hope*:

“In the promises, the hidden future already announces itself and exerts its influence on the present through the hope it awakens”.⁴

It is that hope that the people thrown into exile in Babylon lacked and could not find in their own strength. So God brought it to them and we know it in the person of Jesus Christ. On the fifth Sunday of Lent we feel the weariness of Christ whose soul is troubled. Should he give up while there is still life or should he go on? His identity and his purpose combined in facing the terrible future in order that the law would be written

⁴ Moltmann, Jurgen 1993 *Theology of Hope*
Minneapolis: Fortress Press p18

on the hearts of the people. We may be wearied in our Lenten journey but as with Christ we resolve to look forward together because we believe that Easter will dawn and the fulness of the covenant promise given through Jeremiah will be ours.

I would like to finish with this anonymous poem:

“Press on.
Nothing in the world
Can take the place of persistence.

Talent will not;
Nothing is more common
Than unsuccessful men
With talent.

Genius will not:
Unrewarded genius
Is almost a proverb.

Education will not;
The world is full of
Educated derelicts.

Persistence and determination
Alone are important”

When it gets to this stage in Lent that’s what
counts and we take great comfort that Jesus
felt exactly the same. Amen.