

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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THE NEW COVENANT

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Jeremiah 31:27-34

Luke 18:1-8

A few years ago there was a programme on BBC 2 called "Restoration", when various dilapidated buildings were put up to be voted on so that in the end one was restored. The various contenders had to explain why their chosen ruins or near ruins were the most deserving of being restored. And they had to show how the buildings would be made to look the way they once were, but also how they would find a new purpose in the modern world so that they would not fall into neglect again. I remember that while I was in the borders there was a contender from Greenlaw which all the locals got behind.

This is a word of hope and a word about restoration. A word from the prophet who has been right in foretelling disaster, and who now is looking further ahead. It is a word of hope in despair. It is a word about restoration. And very much like the kind of restoration that the BBC programme was about. Restoration but with a difference. Restoring the old but in a way that has relevance to the new. Restoration, but not to the things of the previous covenant, the letter of the law, the stone tablets, but to a new covenant, written in the human heart. A covenant of individual responsibility, not family liability. The old covenant was like being taken by the hand, like a child with its parent. The new one is more like a relationship of comradeship, friendship, love. It wipes out the past, and all the wrong. It looks to the future with hope.

The prophet uses a metaphor of seeding. He talks of how God will plant, sow seeds, provide for the restoration of the nation. It is still to the nation that God speaks, not to the individual alone. He will seed the nation give it human members, give it livestock for its enrichment. God gives what we need to be his people. We may not need God to seed us with animals, but we do need to be equipped to be the people of God. We need what God wants us to have, not necessarily what we think ourselves that we want. But again, although God is promising to seed the people, to provide for them what they need, it wasn't going to be what he gave before, because being his people is going to be different, deeper, more all-encompassing.

The parable is about God hearing the prayers of his faithful and giving them justice. It is not Jesus saying that God won't hear us unless we nag on at him, it isn't him saying that God is reluctant to move to help his people. What Jesus is saying is that if even flawed, faulty, possibly corrupt human officials can in the end be prevailed on to do the right thing, how much more, how much more quickly, how much more lovingly and graciously will God speed to help his people when they call to him for justice.

A couple of weeks ago there was an article in the "Spectator" magazine entitled "The War on Christians" with the sub-heading, "The global persecution of Christians in the unreported tragedy of

our time". The author began with the recent attacks on Christians in Pashawar – and by the way, I also recently saw a picture of Christians being surrounded and protected in their prayers by Muslim neighbours in Pashawar, just as a few months ago Christians in Egypt protected moderate Muslims, which is a sign of hope and of God's kingdom. However the author began in Pashawar and went from there to India, Nigeria, Iraq, Burma, and North Korea, with side mentions of Congo and Syria. He quoted a statistic that every year 100,000 Christians are killed, though we hear about very little of it, because in the wider world most Christians belong to the poorer less powerful sections of society. The article was written for the secular press, as a call for justice, but any Christian would also read it as a call to prayer.

But we do pray, whenever we hear of such things – and we hear of them more often than they make the national headlines - we do pray. And so the question that perhaps we don't like to ask is does God hear? It was the question that Jeremiah's people in their increasing terror and distress were asking. And it was when it seemed God did not hear that Jeremiah spoke, with words of comfort, words about a new hope.

Similarly, in the parable it was when the widow must have wondered why she kept on bothering that the judge acted. He acted for the worst of reasons, but still he did something. As a human institution the church, especially for us the Church of Scotland, can seem fragile just now. But that is the institution, not the faith. Our faith is not in church structures, but in Jesus Christ, God's Son. Our faith is engraved on our hearts, even as Jeremiah promised that God's law would be.

What does it mean to have God's law written in the heart? Does it mean that you can do whatever you like? You follow your heart, your inclination and nothing else? In a way it can mean that, or a version of that, but only if your heart is God's first. I have reminded you before about the famous saying of St. Augustine, "Love God and do what you like." If your heart is in tune with God's, then your heart will prompt you to live in the way God would, in the way Jesus would. It will prompt you, for instance, to give when others might say, save; or to commit to helping where others guard their time.

I am so encouraged by the people I see who, having their time to dispose of, spend it in organising Rhyme Time, and meeting a need in this community. Or helping out at the Mains, or volunteering for the community car scheme. There is nothing in the Bible that says specifically you should do these things, because they are local to us. But you, if you do them, know that they are in line with God's heart. There are people in this church who work for the community council, or the Laggan Community Association, for the Forest trust, and for other community groups. There are people who are getting involved with the Food-bank. So many ways in which God's law written on your heart moves you to action. And if I say thank you to you for doing these things, or others like them, I know that you will say "But I enjoy it, I get so much from it." Excellent. That is the glory of the Kingdom of God. Doing God's will also feeds us and inspires us and gladdens our hearts.

Last weekend I was in Geneva for meetings with the presbytery of Europe, when there were big changes to put in place and difficult conversations to have. I wasn't particularly looking forward to it, and I knew it would be tiring. And it was. But while the presbytery was discussing things which made some people feel very threatened and hurt, there were still many expressions of concern for and solidarity with those who were proposing the changes that were causing most anxiety. And so despite a lot of words being used, my heart was encouraged and gladdened. This too was God's covenant written on the heart, informing the mind and directing the actions. Whenever you perceive God's Spirit at work, if God's law is written in your heart, if you know the Lord, as God has promised, then your heart will sing for joy, often.

We are looking at the prophets, Jeremiah up till now, but next week we will meet Joel, because they spoke to God's people in difficult times, when the faith itself was under attack, was thought to be not working. Jeremiah is speaking to a people whom he knows are in a hard place that will get worse before it gets better. But he promises that it will get better, though it may not look the same.

So it is with the Church of Scotland. At the moment we are in fact in a difficult place. We are used to one minister, one charge, in a workable sort of way, and I am personally delighted that tomorrow there will be an induction at Nethy for the charge of Abernethy linked with Boat of Garten, Duthil and Kincardine. But there simply are not as many ministers as there used to be, while there is just as much to do; just as many people, if not more, who need to hear the good news of God's love, who need to experience it in sacrament, who need to have the people of God reach out to them in love and care for their whole selves, body and spirit (if you can separate the two). For those of us who like church the way it is, the way it more or less always has been in our lifetime, this is a particularly challenging time to live. For those of us who anchor our faith in the immutability of tradition and ritual, this is a really challenging time. Because the new thing that God is doing to keep faith with his people will not be the same as the old thing. You may see "your minister" shared in a wider fashion. You may find, not this year or next, but in the next ten years or so, that more of the services on Sunday are led by yourselves. You may be asked to accept that an elder can take a funeral, that we need to give up our cherished local identities to work together geographically and ecumenically. But if you can accept changes, these or others, I am sure that you will find blessing. God's new covenant brings us closer to him, in deeper with him.

A few weeks ago Roy and I were talking to the nominating committee at Tomintoul. They have been without a minister for just over two years now. As we talked about how things have gone and how they are going, the people began to loose their worried expressions and smile and say that they have found that they can lead worship, that they have found that they have a ministry to their community. That, and this is important, they have found God with them and within them, blessing and strengthening and leading them forward. It can take a crisis to discover things. And part of the discovery is that it isn't a crisis at all. As we have seen before in listening to Jeremiah, from the end comes a new and far better beginning.

In the second part of his prophecy Jeremiah had to tell the people over and over again that this was not the end. Saying it once was not enough. Sometimes it takes a long time for us to hear good news in the midst of challenge. But if we keep looking to God, keep praying to God, then, unlike the unjust judge, he will delight in coming to help us, to reveal his new blessing to us and through us to others. Amen.

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