

Sermon 29<sup>th</sup> September 2013 Deut 26:1-11 Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15  
'New Directions' Thanksgiving Sunday

Prayer: *Gracious and loving God, you call each one of us by name, inviting us to accept our status as your beloved children, and to join with you in ministry. May our hearts and minds be open to messages of challenge and comfort, as we come before you in faith with thanksgiving. Amen.*

We have been exploring a 'Faith is...' theme for the past few weeks – Faith is about choice / decisions / God / Doing... and today is no exception. Faith enables us to give thanks, even in the most trying of circumstances and without guarantee of security in the immediate future. Giving thanks is what I am going to do now, on behalf of us all thank you for the support for our special thanksgiving offerings this month. We will not be rushing out to spend, especially as winter is (we hope) behind us!). Giving the property Team time to consult and consider the best way forward for our heating needs.

I am always aware of the tension created by us having a 'Thanksgiving offering' – because despite our best efforts our regular giving always drops off during this time. And we base our 'daily' life on our regular giving not the 'specials'. So do we continue with the practice of asking for / offering this opportunity to give thanks financially or not? This is my dilemma – and one the Finance Team have to wrestle with year after year!!!

But the answer is always – yes we do need to offer / have because it's actually not about 'us'; it's not about our heating / roofing needs / our giving to a charity / our donating to a special fund.... It is actually about our faith and the God challenge for us about possessions / about ownership / about provisioning / about trust / about wants vs needs... it's all about faith.

It's about putting good practices in place in our lives that enables us to lead good lives. I mean good, healthy, and balanced lives where we contribute to our communities of interest and care for communities wider than our 'own' – as God leads us to do so. There is a satisfaction and joy that comes with living as God designed us to do. It doesn't mean we are millionaires, have a house full of staff, can buy the latest gadget offered on TV; go on holiday every month for four weeks; have fabulous relationships with our estranged children or family members... cV *And if...*

**If** we were living in Jeremiah's time it **wouldn't mean** that those Babylonian war-horses weren't 'snorting' on *our* borders, because they **certainly had** arrived. Jerusalem itself was under siege (again)! A short detailed Biblical history lesson is necessary if we are even going to come close to understanding how desperate things were for the people in our Bible reading today. King Zedekiah, who has Jeremiah in prison, was in effect a puppet king under Babylonian rule. By the ending of King Zedekiah's rule in 587 BCE he *would* see the truth of Jeremiah's words with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

The situation is very bad. King Zedekiah was king because Zedekiah's brother King Jehoiakim had rebelled against Babylonian rule. In the ensuing war, Jehoiakim died and the Babylonians had retaliated by **taking** Jerusalem, **plundering** the Temple, deporting thousands of people to Babylon. Included among the exiles was Jehoiakim's son; King Jehoiachin, **his** branch of the royal family and the prophet Ezekiel. So Zedekiah was the *puppet* King who was terrified and not at all prepared to have Jeremiah free, to spread his words of doom and gloom, judgement and repentance....

And that's where the story gets really interesting *I think anyway!* God is so involved, whether Zedekiah wants it or not. Right into this situation of fear, terror, devastating loss on a national scale, God brings a word by faith of hope for a new direction through Jeremiah.

Completely against the tide, against the best possible advice about property investment – Jeremiah is told in a dream to take action and he does. He buys land while in prison, in a city under siege! The

complete focus is on the promise that the people would **again one day** take up possession of houses, fields, and vineyards in Israel. New life would come to them because God was with them; with them in the destruction that judgement brought to them **and in** the hope of the new direction Jeremiah was pointing to with his buying of land!

Jeremiah is prepared to invest in the future – because of the Word of the Lord; because of God's involvement; Jeremiah has **confidence** that life will continue even when common sense sees very little evidence for it! **One of the gifts** of faith is this ability to break into life and offer a new direction. One of the gifts God gives is to challenge us **not to get so caught up** in what is happening *around* and even **to us** that we are misled about our current situation and fail to see God in the middle of it all.

As people of faith, our story includes the reality of how God breaks into our determined patterns and offers a new direction. Even when we're in the middle of despair, destruction and we know it is our own fault! Well it usually is isn't it? Jeremiah and the prophets had the way of things – people break with the Lord's ways and that break becomes reflected in their living and everything falls apart....BUT

But what scriptures tell us is that the life of God's people is bigger than anyone of us. We belong to a bigger family than troubles would have us believe. And for us it is in that big – God family that the promise of hope in a future – as yet out of our individual sight – but that promise is given and held true for all time, **because it's not just about us**, but because we are in this with Jeremiah's God, with our Lord Jesus and forever guided by the Holy Spirit. ->

We are not alone, and that brings us to a recognition point of giving thanks to this God who will not leave us alone! **Not** in war, **not** in peace, **not** in our own deep fault, **or in** our deepest joys. I think **death** is the only excuse we will ever have for not coming before the Lord and finding something to give thanks for! There are of course a myriad of ways to do it, and today is our rather formalised recognition which is concluding a period when we have had the opportunity to reflect and make a specific financial gift in acknowledgement of the journey Lord has been with us on, in the past year.

Our pattern for this kind of giving is long established – the Deuteronomy reading is said to reflect an even more ancient tradition than the law book itself! It is based on the story of the people of God finding themselves overwhelmed by what God has done for them and in response... **It's always us responding** – to the Lord. In response to what God has done, they / we are to make an offering of first fruits. Not what's left / the loose change / the bits we don't like.... The **first** offerings go to God **because** of what the Lord has done... cV

Did you notice these instructions *come* as the people **move into** the Promised Land? So right from the beginning of their tenure **they know** the first results of their hard work of reward from the land given to them go back to the giver of the land. These instructions, laws, guidelines are not given in an atmosphere of totalitarian obedience/ authority; these instructions are not about giving the landlord rights before the rest of the bills can be paid; nor about proving ownership of land and paying dues...

They are gifts back to the giver of all - first, given in the way of gifts given and received in a reciprocal relationship between God and people that is founded in the love of God for **all** that He has made. The Lord's gifts have been shared among **all** who live with them- and so all are called to celebrate and continue the pattern because the instructions are actually written not only to apply to the initial generation of settlers. The thanksgiving for the gift of the land is to be acknowledged 'today' by **each succeeding generation**. As each new generation came to 'hear' these instructions they are called to remember the gift of life, the giver and give thanks. Cv

All this belongs to **our faith** legacy, our faith story, not as individuals but as a people of God. We are called to hear the word of the Lord, remember **all** that has been given and give thanks because it enables **new directions**, healthy options, and life balancing habits for **living our faith today**. Amen