

Sermon 22 March 2015
Jeremiah 31:31-34 Psalm 51:1-12 'On our hearts'

Prayer: In our hearts, O God, we are known by you. Every crevice of our past, every heartbeat of our present, is known and loved by you. Inscribe in us the desire to know you, too, and knowing you, may we live more fully as your people. Amen.

Today is Lent 5 – next week we have Palm Sunday, the time when we focus on Jesus riding into Jerusalem for the last time and our Holy Week count down starts. Today we are asked to reflect on forgiveness and grace and covenants and hearts and joy and how once again we hear from God that he is ours and we are His.

As I have had the gift of reflecting on these scriptures for the week it seems to me one of the outstanding features is how God's whole rationale / purpose / intention / desire is driven because we belong to Him. We belong – and that fact is so important to God it is the canvas for everything else. Everything is built on the foundation that we belong and this is an unconditional gift from God.

So when we go wrong, when we walk away, make mistakes, fail to use our gifts, ignore the call into ministry... 'sin' – God has to honour the terms of creation, the terms of His being God and can't be with us. Light and Dark don't mix – But light overcomes the dark every time.

Do you know the story of the Cave and the Sun?

There was once a dark cave, deep down in the ground, underneath the earth and hidden away from view. Because it was so deep in the earth, the light had never been there. The cave had never seen light. The word 'light' meant nothing to the cave, who couldn't imagine what 'light' might be.

Then one day, the sun sent an invitation to the cave, inviting it to come up and visit. When the cave came up to visit the sun it was amazed and delighted, because the cave had never seen light before, and it was dazzled by the wonder of the experience.

Feeling so grateful to the sun for inviting it to visit, the cave wanted to return the kindness, and so it invited the sun to come down to visit it sometime, because the sun had never seen darkness.

So the day came, and the sun entered the cave, it looked around with great interest, wondering what 'darkness' would be like. Then it became puzzled, and asked the cave, 'Where is the darkness?' (Source Unknown)

Lent is a time in our faith year where we openly talk about the 'dark' – about our human ability to turn away from the light of God's presence and find the 'dark' – er side of life. Lent is the time when we openly talk about how this ability of ours is why Jesus – the Light of the World – how Jesus came to be the light for us so that we turn to God (and God's ways of living / laws for living) again, say sorry and are welcomed into his presence again.

In one sense we do it as a faith family weekly – because we always have a prayer of confession and hear the words of assurance of forgiveness – and there is a place for us to do it in our private lives – but being who we are – there are times when it must be an open discussion – and open subject and in the wisdom of the church LENT is that time.

So today we heard from the prophet Jeremiah and had the most wonderful and thought provoking poetry from Psalm 51 on this subject. Jeremiah "speaks of God's promises to the people of Israel while they are still in captivity, still in exile, buried in loss and grief that have broken their hearts and their spirits, too. Their city has been destroyed and their conqueror Babylon has carried away their leaders to the far-off capital of its powerful empire. Dark times for them – right?

But by this 31st chapter, Jeremiah has shifted his message and is no longer telling the people off for their sin and their lack of faithfulness to God. Now he brings the people a new message from God. God is trying to tell them something, Jeremiah says, and it's good news, a word of comfort and hope. God has had compassion on the people; God's heart has been touched by their suffering, and God forgives them.”^{*1}

Into the despair – the darkness that international politics and their own actions have taken them the people are given hope, a new light to shine into their situation. They belong to God and he will never let them go. They have his heart, all he wants is theirs! Because the people broke the first +++ covenants, *today* we heard how God offers a new one. **Not new** because it has **nothing** to do with the old, **new** because it has a ‘new’ clause, has a new part. The Covenant is **still** between the people and God, **still** bound by the Torah / laws / rules of God’s living, and **still** operating within the faith community.

The ‘new’ is that it is now **unconditional** – God offers and there is nothing the people have to do because the law is now on their hearts. It is not an external observance or written in stone, it is **as alive** as their body, their breath, their heart.^{*3} In Hebrew, ‘heart’ represents not so much the seat of the emotions as the place of practical knowledge, and is not significantly different from ‘mind’ for us. It is perhaps easier to picture it as the core of our being – our middle – the centre of our whole self.

And for Jeremiah and his people its meaning includes the sense of a core experience and core identity, ***much more*** than just a feeling. **And at that core is forgiveness**. The people of Israel have the chance to begin again, with the issuing of the new covenant "Israel is now completely unburdened by its past".^{*5} Forgiveness does that for you. – It is a new start. And God teaches us by doing it first, because we belong and God loves that more than anything else – God forgives from the core of God’s being and welcomes us into himself and his ways again.

So our Lenten thinking today is about new hearts – core replacements! And whatever language is used we know when the presence of God in our life is dimming, we know when the dark starts to define our actions, thoughts, lives, and it is not long before we realise that overcoming it is not something we can do on our own. We need our higher power to support and enable and re-charge our batteries – and the hardest part of knowing is admitting it and asking for help.

Confession is so hard. I can’t help it is so hard in part because with the law now written on our hearts we think faith / religion is only a self-private thing. We fail to understand that the faith community and God’s laws are still part of a living faith and that it is private before God, not private before the ‘self’. Whatever the reasons, confession is hard and yet as we hear from Psalm 51 today – **so good!**

This is the most well-known psalm of confession and is widely used in Christian worship.^{*4} It teaches that sin can’t be escaped and that it separates us from God’s presence. It can’t be used to support arguments for original sin – that’s eisegesis, but it can be used to show us the good, the joy, the beauty from being fully restored to our place in God and that we can’t restore ourselves. It has been ^{*5}said that the point made in the psalm is that sin is primarily a theological problem, meaning that it is a problem concerning God and his relationship with us.

This is so even when the sin is clearly social (remember the title: David’s psalm after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba). This does not lessen the responsibility for sin at a personal or social level. What it does teach is that sin is a problem that goes even deeper than its personal or social manifestation. It is bigger than us – and when we are trying to deal with it we have to ask for help – call in reinforcements!

The most powerful help comes from the Lord – from the God who rules from his heart to ours. From the core of God’s being when we come asking for help – our sin is forgotten, the darkness dispelled, we are forgiven with the joy, the light of his presence restored in our lives, to our core, and on our hearts. Amen