
LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR B

Colin Dundon

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR B

Jeremiah 31.31–34; Psalm 119.9–16; Hebrews 5.5–14; John 12.20–33

As we journey towards Easter the readings become increasingly focussed on the crucifixion and the resurrection and their meanings for Jesus, for the participants and for us. What binds them together is the underlying tune that we have been singing, of covenant and the various riffs that the writers play on this theme. So it continues today and through the week.

The covenant is God's loving, energising and utterly faithful promise to pursue his purpose to solve the problems in creation, using covenant partners who engage this creator and covenant God in loving faithfulness.

I know that is a long sentence, longer than I would normally like. If you can make it shorter please do so read it again and keep it in mind when you are living your life and trying to understand where that story intersects with God's story.

We leave behind us the events of the Exodus and its aftermath and find ourselves in the midst of another crisis that might not only bring the kingdom of Judah to its knees but to the brink of annihilation; the Babylonian invasion of Judah (and surrounding petty states) and the ensuing exile and dispersion (the years 597–587 BCE). It is hard for us to grasp the utterly destructive nature of this event; Temple gone, land gone, royal line of David gone, the people dispossessed and displaced. What future can emerge from this? Has the Lord abandoned us is their cry? (See Psalm 74 and 89) Must we now sink into the anonymity of the nations as slaves or low class workers?

In their better moments they knew that God had been patient with them as they continually rejected the covenant and the offer of covenant partnership over time. But it left a lot of questions hanging as we have seen. That's a long history of contention

and argument between the Israelites and the Lord that you find in the Psalms and the prophets.

That leads us to the question behind this prophecy, what of the great plan to restore the world through a restored and renewed nation? And what of the so-called faithful promises, the covenant? Our short excerpt today from Jeremiah is one response to questions like those.

Jeremiah 31.31–34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No 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.

It is hard to put ourselves in the shoes of an ancient people with a wildly different cultural and political understanding, but it is worth the try even just for a moment. Perhaps a near experience might be the Rohingya in our world or, much closer to home and more painful, the displacement, murder and dislocation of the indigenous people of this land. Land taken and others transplanted into it, temple razed to the ground (mining companies blowing up sacred sites) and their law ignored and supplanted by that of a foreign ruler. Reflect on the reading now. Maybe our privileged position won't let us into its inner secrets but let's see if we can capture a fleeting glimpse. I wonder what they would hear and I wonder what we hear?

I hear the following echoes.

The most obvious is the promise of a new covenant. This chapter begins with God saying “I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people” (31.1). That is the ancient covenant promise that has glued the covenant together. Then in verses 31.3–4 God says “I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you” and then continues “Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel.”

Who is looking after this relationship? On what grounds? For what end? What does that tell you about this relationship?

Is this just Moses on steroids? More regulation slicing the moral onion finer and finer until absolutely nothing in human life is left out? (That is some people's view of what Christian religion is including Christians).

The second echo I hear denies this emphatically. Whatever it is, it is not slicing the moral onion more finely. Can you hear God's grief in verse 32? And how does that match with verses 3–4 that I have quoted above? And what about this extraordinary phrase "...O virgin Israel." How can the reckless and wayward covenant partner be a virgin?

That reverberates with the third echo I hear. The Lord proposes new way of knowing, being and living (33–34). These words are worth sitting with for some time. What do you hear being proposed? What difference might that make to the way you understand and live the Christian life?

It all begins in the heart, the seat of desire. The desires of the heart are the deepest expression of identity, who we love and who we will embrace. It is there God will meet his restored covenant partners; he will be their God and they will be his desire. Then, in that personal and familial relationship, they will "know the Lord". A fundamental egalitarianism emerges where there is no secret knowledge; only the known desire of God for us and our own desire for God.

To enhance that we need to know two stories, our own and the Other's. In this case in knowing the Other's we know our own. God's story intertwines with our story. Knowing and embracing both those stories becomes our identity-giving story.

In the last part of 34 I hear another echo. God breaks the cycle of sin and punishment. How? This is such a common-place we might need to stop and let that sink in. Already the world is being transformed. How transformative is that for you?

Take time to sit with this beautiful promise that even includes us, Gentiles, and not only the Jewish folk of the sixth century BCE and their successors.

Where has God taken you on your Lenten trek?

Once more the psalm responds to the promises found in Jeremiah. Read it as a response and then let that response illuminate Jeremiah.

Psalm 119.9–16

⁹How can young people keep their way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.

¹⁰With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.

¹¹I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.

¹²Blessed are you, O LORD;
teach me your statutes.

¹³With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.

¹⁴I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.

¹⁵I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.

¹⁶I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.

What have you discovered for yourself? Does it indicate some changes you might make? What is a standout for you?

Because of the way the poetry is written it can seem to us that the thought is all over the place and repetitive so we have to work to find the themes. When we do that we can find a fruitful world for meditation on God and ourselves.

This psalm celebrates the relationship between the covenant making God and his covenant partner cast in this poem as a young person or persons. The cement of the relationship is the revelation God makes of himself and thus of his partner (you and me). His revelation is of his character (love), what he does (saves, redeems, forgives) and what his purposes are for the creation (see above; remind yourself of what the covenant is for and thus our part in it). That revelation has an impact on the partner. So let's see if we can explore this remembering that this is a little window into God's story with us. It's like a tiny moment in a blockbuster movie but without it the movie makes little sense.

So the centre of the poem is the Lord who reveals himself. How else can we know Another if they do not open themselves up to us? Indeed, we to them.

The poet wants discernment or wisdom in living out this relationship of love in daily life.

The seat of the relationship is the human heart. The human heart is the seat of desire, the motivation of life. That is where the interaction with the Lord takes place. Did you notice the connection with Jeremiah? Remember the warning in Noah's back story where God judges the human heart to be wayward? What do think it means that God wants to penetrate to the very citadel of waywardness?

The means that the poet commands is reflection on the Lord's words, promises, covenant requirements and story. All of this comes not in tick box format but in story, like Jeremiah above. They might be stories of betrayal, great grief, forgiveness, and restoration. They range across every human possibility and emotion. The heart finds its identity in this story.

The pitfalls on the way we have already noted; the desire of the human heart. The poet simply speaks of sin and straying; the distraction of the heart's desire to self. Yet it is here that God wants to wrangle with us; in the distracted heart.

So to help with that the psalmist asks the question of keeping the pure way. Notice how this links with Jesus' words, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Matthew 5.8). We tend to think of purity as moral rectitude but the psalmist and Jesus have something else in mind. The pure heart is one that has one desire, to love God: All else falls into its place. But we do need wisdom to do that. So we need to treasure God's story with us (remember Jesus' words again, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" {Matthew 6.21}). Seems Jesus is on the same page as the psalmist. The poet uses verbs like, guarding, seeking, treasure, meditating delighting and fixing my eyes on the way, to make sure that we understand that this is a two-way street. God wrangles with us; we wrangle with God as he teaches us. Sounds turbulent.

So what does this say for our spiritual trek? How do you think you can join in? What difference might it make to you?

Hebrews 5.5–14

⁵So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'; ⁶as he says also in another place, 'You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek.'

⁷In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

¹¹About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. ¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; ¹³for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

Now let me guess. This reading leaves you puzzled. Where does this fit in the journey? Indeed, where does it fit anywhere? You know what? It is a puzzling selection. But puzzling always pulls us up short and says to us there may be something important embedded here.

We are reading this little excerpt from the letter to the Hebrews in the context of our communal journey towards Easter as well as in our worship. On the other hand, this passage comes at a major turning point in a highly developed argument by a skilful and knowledgeable lecturer. Hebrews is most likely what we would call a public lecture that develops an argument that is artful in presentation and skilful in the use of knowledge. We need to recognize these differing contexts if we are to make sense of

what is said and find nourishment for our journey. Puzzling sometimes needs unravelling.

This lecture called Hebrews has one purpose; to help Christian folk avoid one of the pitfalls of the wayward human heart, slowly sliding away from Christ into something more comfortable and relaxed. The author does that by examining who Jesus Christ is and what he has done for them and the world. And because his audience may well be Jewish Christians he uses the ancient scriptures as the grounds for his argument and exposition. This was a serious pastoral issue then and today. Cherry-picking religious ideas sounds like a great idea; mix and match (or maybe not) religion. It is the modern (or postmodern) way.

The passage breaks into two parts. The first part is found in 5–10. The second part 11–14. Did you notice that there does not seem to be much connection between them? The reason lies not in Hebrews but in the lectionary choice. Verses 5.5–10 are the conclusion of an argument that finds its core texts in Psalm 2 “You are my Son” and Psalm 110.4 “You are a priest forever.” These are the roots of the argument that has been before and the foundations for what is to follow. In the first chapters of Hebrews the author like a good advocate lays the groundwork for his case. In chapters 7 and onwards he expands that case into full blown exposition of what that all means and why they should not let their faith slide into an oblivion of muddy thought.

On the other hand, 5.11–14 begins an appeal for folk to pay attention. He promises to take them on a journey that will require hard intellectual and spiritual effort but will lead, not into a pit of despair, but to a mature discerning faith rooted in a clear grasp of who Jesus is and what he has done.

Remember that in its original context this is spoken communication, the speaker has brought his preliminaries to a close and now wants the audience to pay attention to the tough stuff.

So even in this fractured form in the lectionary the author invites us on the one hand to reflect on Christ in order to give us a footing and to face the fact that the wayward human heart is often happy to drift along in a muddle without maturing.

What can you learn about Jesus’ person and work? Why is that important in our covenant journey towards Easter? Meditate on Jesus work as described here. (The reference to Melchizedek concentrates on the word ‘forever’, impossibility for routine priesthood in the Temple). Can you see the force of the conclusion in 8–9 as an argument against apostasy? How does that help us on our pilgrimage?

Up to this point the lecturer has suggested that his listeners had acquired a ‘hearing impairment.’ Having such an impairment I know what it is like to switch off and pay no attention (off with fairies). Now the author is pressing his assessment home to

them. What would it have been like to hear that? How might you have reacted to the speaker?

He does call them dull in understanding and uses the metaphors of learning the ABC all over again (the basic elements) to describe them. Worse, he goes on to use the contrast between children feeding on milk and adults being nourished by solid food. This type of technique was used in the ancient world to keep the audience on their toes and engaging with the speaker.

How do you engage this imagery? Does it wake us up to particular perils on the spiritual way? Are there ways we can master the faith and learn discernment that will help us live our lives well?

The speaker is forcing us as members of a Christian community to address the issue of Christian growth. There are no answers given in this tiny fragment but we cannot escape the challenge.

Slowly we are wending our way towards our goal but there is a deep question yet to answer. The lecturer broached it in Hebrews, “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” Now the great hurdle comes into focus and will remain in the foreground; “When I am lifted up from the earth...”

To that we turn.

John 12.20–33

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

²⁷‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ ³⁰Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

The journeys of Jesus have come to an end. This is the last public speech he will utter; hope, promise and anguish fill the air all at once and for the moment it is hard to know how they fit together.

The episode is full of people all trying to grasp the significance of the moment. Jesus is the key and he alone grasps it. But there are Greeks, Philip and Andrew, God and the crowd. And the poor Greeks don't seem to get an answer.

Read the passage again and see if it's possible to enter into the conflicting expectations that come to a head in this scene. What do you hear? What do you see?

In 12.19 the Pharisees say, "Look the world has gone after him." Then the Greeks come and say "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." The 'prophecy' is true. What will happen now? Why are the Greeks significant? These are Greeks who have been attracted to Judaism but now want to see something else. Their search triggers the events that follow.

But what will those events be and what is their meaning?

Jesus' glory will be on full display. Glory usually means splendour and power, brilliance and in our world celebrity.

Then we get the eloquent image of the grain falling into the ground, dying and bringing forth new life. The glory of the growth demands the dying in the ground; one life to create boundless life.

And just to be sure we understand the full import of this image disciples have to learn that this is their pattern of and path to glory (25–26). If the disciples (or Greeks who wish to see Jesus for that matter) were looking for celebrity and power then what is about to unfold will destroy the illusion.

Reflect on this pattern of discipleship. Are we as covenant partners willing to take the risk?

Jesus turns back to his own situation and faces the terror he feels as the hour is now with him (27– 33). The hour has come and so has anguish. He turns to the Father to bring him safely through. Only in that way can God be glorified; that way alone can God's power and love be seen in full brightness. There is no pugnacious masculinity here so beloved of our world and its politics. I am reading a book called *Jesus And John Wayne* which is an historical and theological exploration of a kind of Christianity in which Jesus and John Wayne (a gun-toting masculinity that saves the world) are conflated.

What pattern of human life does Jesus portray for us in this short inner conversation? What sort of humanity does a covenant partner to this God look like?

The Father's answer envelopes Jesus' prayer. True glory and true power lie elsewhere. The way the world will be restored is the defeat of the ruler of this world and his minions. And it comes through being lifted up. We have come across this before in the story of the healing snake.

This is the route that God chooses to restore his rule in the world where those who rule it have laid it waste, trampled the poor and exalted themselves as kings, lords and even gods. It is the route of weak flesh, grief and allowing those who represent the ruler of this world to exercise their deadly and pugnacious masculinity with its untrammelled lust for power. He will die, lifted up.

Blinded by their lust they don't see the deadly consequences. They and their master are exposed for the world to see. The world will look and the cross will draw them to a new way.

Someone has said "Swords don't glorify the creator-God. Love does. Self-giving love best of all." Reflect on our mission as the covenant God's people, covenant partners. We might not use swords but how can we do better?