

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS TO DIOCESAN SYNOD MAY 2018

“The days are surely coming ... when they will know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.”

Scholars are divided concerning how many of the oracles and poems set within the Book of Jeremiah are actually original to the person himself. But there is almost unanimous agreement that the passage we had as our first reading (Jer 31v31ff) is by his hand and in his rhythmic prose.

The sentiments contained in the phrases I have just quoted could not be more apposite to our assembly as Synod at this time. Jeremiah sees that at some future date God will forgive the breaking of the covenant made with Moses on Mt Sinai and replace it with a *new covenant*. We are familiar with the language. When synods of our predecessors – at that time probably just bishops, but synods, nonetheless – met to settle the canon of Scripture – legislation, and we have some of that – they took some contemporary Christian literature and gave it the title *New Covenant* or Testament and, by definition, the scripture already in circulation became known as the Old Covenant or Testament.

The days will come, the prophet says, when there will be a new covenant – will **surely** come. Is this certainty or assurance – or both? It is certainly assurance offered to the people in times of significant political upheaval with changes of government ... for them kings. And the experience of exile – refugees homeless and wandering, captured in foreign lands. There is also political intrigue that includes assassination and many other acts of violence. The days will surely come ... for a new covenant. Not just the recovery of the old stability or ways but a new, but still a covenant relationship. There is intended assurance of the people, clearly, but certainty ... well, let's leave that hanging for a moment.

What Jeremiah says about the new covenant and how it varies from the old might be interesting for us today in Synod. We have legislation ... we are in a context worldwide of great upheaval and there are changes of government – although, thankfully, not many are the result of assassination; but there is a plethora of violence disfiguring creation. The Sinai covenant recorded in the Book of Exodus is written on stone tablets or, by later interpretation, phylacteries as detailed in Deuteronomy. Jeremiah says that the new covenant will be written on ... heart. Note that the word in Hebrew here is singular, despite most English translations; it will be written on their heart.

That is one difference between the old and the new – but the next is the mind blowing one.

No longer, as is recorded in Deuteronomy, will it be necessary for a person to teach their children the covenant because everyone will *know* the Lord. The implication seems to be that a written word is rendered superfluous because the human heart, so to speak, will be directly attuned to God. Now that is not a sentimental doctrine because in Hebrew thought the heart is not the seat of the emotions but of the mind and will. Our mind and will, will be directly attuned to God.

A human heart and therefore, mind and will – singular – attuned to God.

To stay for a moment with the Hebrew mindset, to **know** is an intimate concept. It has more than a touch of the carnal about it. We will know means **be intimate with**.

For me, these few verses from Jeremiah are so important. They speak of the unspeakable, inconceivable and utterly mind blowing truth that because of Jesus, the Word made flesh, I united in and with him can know God. But, not just me – you too, and every person in the world and across

time. With one heart, in one Body, we can know God. This is more than blessed assurance; it is true and certain. Is it explicable in words by the human intellect – no, not unaided. Words are written and they alone are not enough. The new covenant is in the blood of Christ – as Jesus spoke of himself at the Last Supper. By the gift of Jesus and his Spirit, humankind can know, and be one with, the creator and author of all things; he who has made us for himself without whom all human hearts are restless.

My friends, this is what we are for. This is why we exist.

The days are **surely coming**, even amongst the tribulations and trials of 21st Century life, when they will know me. How? How did you meet Jesus? Where do you meet Jesus? Do I know him and realise that his heart and mine can beat as one?

The fact that this is possible and a knowable reality is literally breathtaking. It takes my breath away. And it holds me in a moment of wonder and praise. Poised in the gap between time and eternity but in the here and now. Paradoxical? Most certainly. Challenging? Beyond doubt. Understandable? Well, yes; when shared with others. It is in the sharing that the truth dawns!

How can it be shared, this new covenant? Well, that is what detains us in this Synod. Alongside this wondering, everything must fall into its shadow. When compared to it, nothing else we do can have any value. The sharing of it is what has inspired countless millions over two millennia. And I believe that we as a Diocese, or most of us anyway, are poised and ready – on the edge of our seats, longing and yearning. Our neighbours and friends are thirsty, the land is dry and parched. This syn-odos = one way ... must be a watershed for us and the fact that the Lectionary sets these verses before us at evening prayer is surely a wake-up call.

The antidote to selfishness is love and we often talk of how lover's hearts beat as one. The Good News which is ours is a vision of beauty that can take us all out of the mire of a one dimensional narcissistic existence into the vitality of a world where the I is subsumed, but not lost, in the thou or the other.

And I have used the vision of beauty to describe the Good News totally deliberately. It is said to be in the eye of the beholder; and this is right. However the concept of beauty, from the Latin *bellus*, to be fine, as in approaching perfect; or, as we use it colloquially, "you beauty!" to denote the good and the excellent; contains within itself, the ability to draw a person onwards and outwards – to strive for what is beyond; to reach out in hope; to long, in love.

There is much in the lives of people that mitigates against this. The obvious things like the violence of Gaza, or in the home, the trials of rural poverty, the horrors of famine and drought, the depopulation of the countryside, the seemingly unavoidable impulse towards consumption rather than production, the suppression and torture of people in totalitarian regimes – felt acutely when they share our faith for which they are singled out – all these, and many more, disfigure the face of the earth. They are unattractive; they are not beautiful. Save, of course, that the normalising of such things perverts the human will and there appear to be individuals, if not cultures, who are drawn by the very opposite of beauty and goodness.

The faith teaches that everyone is made with a longing for God – a move towards, out of and beyond – in a journey to the origin and destiny of all that is and ever will be. Much of the perversion of human wills is a suppression of this longing, sometimes wilfully by either individual or state, but more often surreptitiously by an ever increasing making sacred of the subjective. People are becoming devoted to it. It is quite possibly the most damaging heresy of the modern day. It is

idolatry and is corrosive of the Christian narrative. It has to be challenged and revealed as leaving humankind impoverished, dejected and aimless. Like sheep without a shepherd.

There is objective beauty and it is the world as God intends it to be. What is more, we know it and are granted glimpses into it and experiences of it. Those breathtaking moments of which I spoke just now ... when, if you like, our guts are knocked out of us and we have to breathe in, or more accurately gasp, to fill our lungs with new and transformed air ...

It is in these moments, these moments of pause and challenge and questioning; times of stirred excitement and perceived adventure, times of wondering and pondering ... occasions of adoration of the unknowable – but in those moments, understood however fleetingly - these are times, places and locations for our meeting with Jesus. They are common to humans and it is our duty and joy to interpret them in evangelism, provide them in worship and acknowledge them in our teaching and forming. And, consequently, to challenge any situation in which the potential of beauty is being extinguished.

Our buildings ... our common life ... our personal demeanour ... and our public perception has to speak of beauty. Accordingly our syn-odus, our one way, must not only speak but act in unity with God in his beauty, with the Church universal as it continues the mission of Jesus and with each other in the family. For we have a new covenant written on the heart of the Body of Christ. Therefore, if our way of living, witnessing and proclaiming is not beautiful, its ugly facets will be the ones which catch the prevailing cultural light and reflect not the gospel of Jesus Christ but simply another option within the market place of consumerist acquisition; an additional idol at the shrine of the sacred subjective. I don't know about you ... but, for me, that is not an option.

I have given you a new covenant written on the heart, says the Lord. Like my namesake John at the Last Supper, I choose to lay my head close to the heart of Jesus that my heart – that is my whole life and existence – and his sacred heart might beat as one.