

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Sermon Text – Jeremiah 31:31-34

Theme: “*The New Covenant*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

As the season of Lent draws to a close and we are approaching Easter, we hear God’s Word in Jeremiah describing how He is going to establish a new covenant with his people. For God to make a new covenant implies there was something wrong with the old one – or that the old covenant had been broken and needed to be replaced.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The Old Covenant

“Behold, the days are coming declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”

To understand why God felt the need to make a new covenant it is important to remember and understand something of the old covenant for God said it will “not [be] like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.” The old covenant was made between God and the ancestors of Israel when he brought them out of Egyptian slavery and is understood to be most clearly given in the contract drawn up between God and Moses on Mount Sinai. Here God gave His Commandments which were written on stone. The Israelites were to keep and obey God’s commandments and for His part, God would continue to live with His people, blessing them with His presence.

So the purpose of the old covenant was all about relationship. Its aim was to restore the relationship between God and people which was broken when the first people, Adam and Eve, fell to the temptations of Satan. Not only did it set about restoring the relationship between people and God, it was also the foundation for good relationships between people themselves. The first three commandments dealt with humanity’s relationship with God and the last seven commandments dealt with relationships between one another. It was a good covenant that God created as a gift for His people.

Now this covenant was set in stone which implies permanency. It was a binding contract for all time. But it wasn’t intended to be a remote set of rules that were to be locked away. God always intended that His people own them as their own – to be referred to every day as a guiding light for how they were to live with God and with one another. After Moses brought down the Ten Commandments, God told his people, “These words that I command you today shall be on your *heart*. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deut 6:6-9) In other words, God wanted His people to know his commandments so intimately so that they were guided according to His will at all times. They were to be talked about each day; taught to the children; written in the home and on the gates so that people were constantly reminded of how God wanted His people to live.

God’s law was to be written and put in little boxes which were bound on the hand and on the forehead and you can still see ultra orthodox Jews wearing these boxes as they go about their daily business. They were to remind the people that God’s law guide what they do, represented by the hand; and what they think, represented by the forehead. The whole person was to be guided by God’s Word. But even at this time, God wanted His people to take His Word to heart, not just as a set of rules to be done but to be lived.

The New Covenant

Well if the old covenant was set in stone, and if it was bound to the hand and forehead to guide God’s people so they would live according to His will – what went wrong? Why is there a need for a new covenant?

Put simply, the chosen people of God were unable to keep God's covenant. They broke the rules, they disobeyed the commandments and instead of living in God's presence and in peace with each other, there was constant strife. And this is seen in the biggest sense as the Israelites divide into two nations and then are sent into exile from the very land God had given them. Because God's people broke the covenant, a new covenant must be drawn up or else the relationship between God and humanity will be destroyed once more.

So God describes the new contract. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares 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." (v33) No longer will God's law be written on stone, but it will be written on the hearts of His people. The law won't be something to be done, it will be *who we are!*

"Behold, the days are coming declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." (v31) The new covenant was sealed with the blood of the lamb who died on the cross in our place. The death of Jesus meant that the final sacrifice had been made and humanity has been restored back to God. What now is the purpose of this new covenant? Exactly the same as the old one – "For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (v34) The new covenant is the fulfilment of the old one and it is Jesus who has finally satisfied the requirements of God's law.

Our New Testament reading from Hebrews describes how Jesus, "being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb 5:9). The Greek here points to Jesus fulfilling the role for which he came, rather than simply being a moral perfection, although it is that too. Our obedience to Jesus is not an obligation to the old covenant law that we must do, but more of a natural law as day surely follows night. Not because day *must* follow night but that is simply the natural ordering of things.

Living as Covenant People

The old covenant set about restoring the relationship between God and humanity. It was set in stone, it was the guide for God's people, and it should have been taken to heart so they would know Him and they would live in peace and under God's blessing. The new covenant is the fulfilment of God's law that changes everything, yet at the same time it changes nothing.

As people of the new covenant we don't have to obey God's commandments to be his people. We don't have to look to a set of rules to do what God wants us to. And yet the rules are still there. But now they are written on our hearts so they don't tell us what to do, they tell us who we are. Now because we are people of the new covenant, we will live our lives according to God's law because that's the relationship we have with God and with each other.

And because you now live as new covenant people, when you fail to live according to God's law written on your heart, God will forgive you and he will remember your sin no more. Not because you've been good in the past or because you promise to be good in the future. God will forgive you because Jesus has died in your place. In your baptism, you have been raised to new life. You are a new covenant person whom God now claims as His own.

The season of Lent is drawing to a close. You may have made a commitment to give something up for Lent or you may have made a resolution to turn away from the sins of the past. I pray this has been a blessing for you, but even more so, I pray that you have the confidence in God's Word which tells you that you are a new covenant person and that Jesus' death brings you forgiveness and freedom from sin.

And the may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.