

October 17, 2010

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 31:27-34; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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A NEW COVENANT

Some of you might remember Don McLean singing "*by the rivers of Babylon, we lay down and wept...and wept, for thee Zion*"¹ When the leading people of Israel were taken into exile in Babylon they were broken-hearted. Jeremiah had told them over and over that ignoring the ways of justice would lead to the unthinkable happening and that the Temple in Jerusalem itself would be destroyed. Once they were in Babylon he had told them to settle in for the long term, to marry and have children, to trade, to seek the welfare of Babylon and even to pray for the Babylonians who had taken them captive.² Then into this reality comes a voice of hope -- a voice neither offering pie-in-the-sky unreality, nor undoing the circumstance of the people or the consequence of their arrogance and sin -- but a voice of reasonable and holy hope.

If the Bible is anything, it is realistic. There is no evidence that God desires that we escape from the consequences of our choices or from the experience of heavy and broken hearts, something we recognized in the words of our opening hymn about God's extraordinary love.³

We know Babylon when we are guilty, when we are bereaved, when life simply does not work out the way we want it to, when we suffer the consequences of our own behavior, when we are 'called out' or 'called to account' and on and on. We all know something about exile in Babylon which is why the Psalms and hymns of our tradition have such resonance in our hearts. We know that we have to deal with the reality of our lives even when we don't like them.

I know that you know what it is like to have one of those weeks where it seems that nothing goes the way you want it to go. I've had one of those weeks when I know that if I was to drive somewhere in Atlanta and there were no other cars on the road I would still be stopped at every traffic light and road block. At such times we can either rail against the injustice of it all, bemoan our bad fortune, or we can stop trying to sail against a headwind and figure out how to tack towards our destination.

Jeremiah had reminded the people of the realities of their lives in his letter telling them to put down roots, but in this word of hope that we hear today, he is

¹ Psalm 137.1

² Jeremiah 29:4-7

³ 379. "God is Love, let heaven adore Him" to the tune of *Abbot's Leigh*

reminding them of their real destination: and that is right relationship or covenant relationship with God. This is the first and only mention of a “new covenant” in the Hebrew Scriptures. The possibility of restored and right relationship with God is only available by God’s gracious gift. There will be new life and successive generations for Israel and Judah in times to come. Sin will still bear consequence but not for generation after generation. In this new covenant, the law will be written on the hearts of the people and they will be forgiven. In the meantime, we know from the context, they have the Torah and they can be observant where they are.

And so this word of hope was remembered over the generations. Eventually some of the descendants of the exiles were able to return to their homeland and once again God’s faithfulness was celebrated. But somehow even that did not make up for the continuing experiences of sin and broken-heartedness that afflicted the people. There was and is no ‘magic bullet’ that is going to put everything to rights. What friends and followers of Jesus saw in him was another fulfillment of Jeremiah’s word of hope, the initiation of this new covenant in which right relationship becomes possible in new ways and for all people transcending or fulfilling the specificity of the Land, the Law and the Temple. But even this new dispensation of grace and the sign of God bearing the suffering of the world in God’s own being still had not erased sin and its consequence and still had not made perfect the manifestation of justice of all people in the presence of God.

The various words of advice for those of us living in this new dispensation amount to the same thing that Jeremiah told the exiles: One day you will be home. In the meantime you can seek what really matters in life and that is right relationship with God and one another. You can allow love and justice and kindness and compassion to be your compass and guide as you remember the story and practice the faith. From *Timothy*: “be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable...” From *Luke*: “Pray always and do not lose heart...”

This strange parable of the persistent widow is really Jesus using a joke or caricature to make his point. Everyone would have recognized old Mrs. So-and-So. She was always writing to the papers and holding up her solitary placard outside City Hall. In my imagination she probably kept cats. And this woman who is variously an object of fun and pity in Jesus story becomes all the poor of the world crying out for justice, holding fast the faith that there is justice to be had, and staying in relation with those in power, however unwelcome the constant reminder of her need might be. And then there is the judge “who neither feared God, nor had respect for the people.” We all recognize him too. A person of power who is at the right parties and is good to know even though he thinks ‘greed is good’ and ‘God is for losers’ and ‘the poor wouldn’t be poor if they just worked hard’ and so on. He is neither fun nor pitiful in any immediate sense. He stands as a judgment on any of us who have acquiesced in something regardless of right or wrong, just to get the street person to go away or our children to be quiet. In Jesus’ story he is a cipher for justice, a pathetic foretaste of real justice of the kind that God is faithful to provide to those “chosen ones who cry to him day and

night." This is not a parable urging us to make intercession for things we want and bugging God until we get them. It is a human farce that reminds us of what really matters and that is persistence in the practice of our faith be the times favorable or unfavorable. In times good and bad we can hold fast a reasonable and holy hope, making meaning in our choices and doing the things that we know to be important: practicing generosity, loving even when we don't feel like it and above all coming weekly around the Table of the Lord to orient ourselves toward that which is of ultimate worth -- a matter of priority and commitment. For that is the path to abundant life, not only in the future, but here and now as we practice love, seeking right relation with God and each other.

I will make a new covenant says the Lord. I will put my law within the hearts of the people. I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

In our customary and brief time of silence let us respond to this word of hope in gratitude and prayer...