

Lent 5, Yr. B

March 18, 2018

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

This morning I'd like to focus on the texts from John and Jeremiah, reading each of them in the light of the other. The context for the Jeremiah reading is the period of the Babylonian exile. Jerusalem is gone, most of the Israelites are in exile, Jeremiah has told them that all this has happened because of their sin – because of their failure to live up to the covenant. But in this part of his writing, sometimes called the Book of Consolation, he's doing just that – consoling them: this part of the book is about restoration and return, about forgiveness, about beginning again, about God forging a new relationship with them. I guess you could say that, from God's point of view, that's only going to work if they have new hearts – hearts that are like God's. And we all know what that kind of heart is like – that kind of heart is about relationship rather than rules, it's about caring for all of God's creation, not just oneself; it's about loving God so deeply, with one's heart and mind and soul, that it's a joy to try to work God's will in the world.

This morning's psalm is about sin. First there's the recognition that one has sinned and then there's the desire for forgiveness and for the former relationship to be restored. Sin is sometimes talked about in terms of missing the mark – we've tried, but we didn't quite get it right – and sometimes in terms of curving inward upon oneself, and sometimes in terms of a broken relationship between us and God that results because WE'VE turned away. But whichever definition one uses, one thing is clear. The relationship needs to be mended; reconciliation has to happen.

Earlier this month we watched the movie, *Invictus*, about Nelson Mandela, when he was elected as President in South Africa and when apartheid ended. It was a powerful movie – there had been grievous sin against the blacks of the country. Persecution and refusal to recognize them as fellow humans, let alone citizens, meant that the society was broken. So when Mandela came to power, whites undoubtedly feared that his natural response, now that he was in power, would be revenge. But it wasn't. Instead, Mandela was about forgiveness and about forging a new country in which all would be respected. At one point in the movie, the captain of the SA soccer team visits the prison in which Mandela spent many years. He went into the cell and closed the door; he stretched out his arms and could touch both walls with his hands and he wonders how it was possible for a man to undergo that kind of treatment and come out looking, not for revenge, but for healing and reconciliation. It was, I think, an excellent example of what we heard several weeks ago – an example of being able to move from human thinking to divine thinking, or, in the words of today's scriptures, to somehow come to a heart upon which the law of God was written. Not external rules, but an internal attitude.

External rules follow the letter of the law, but not the spirit – the spirit is about going beyond the requirements of the law, to the heart of the whole thing, which is about reconciliation, forgiveness and love. I saw this once when I was practicing law. I was the second chair in a murder trial, in which a young man had shot his adoptive mother. His name was Andrew. When I went to visit him in the jail, the deputy asked me if I wanted some kind of buzzer to alert the staff if things got dangerous. I didn't know Andrew, but I said I thought I'd be fine and

indeed, I was. He was quiet and shy and full of remorse. As I recall, he had two questions that day: can I be forgiven (and even though this was long before I had a priest's hat to wear, I could assure him that he could be and was) and the second was whether they would let him out of jail to go fishing . He thought perhaps that would work if they would tie him to a tree with a rope long enough for him to reach the water. The whole thing was heart-breaking. But that was only the beginning. Andrew had some psychological issues and his adoptive uncle was a psychology professor who understood both what had been going on in the relationship between Andrew and his mother and what Andrew needed for healing. At the trial, the uncle testified and volunteered to take charge of Andrew's rehabilitation, and made a powerful statement of forgiveness. The judge agreed and custody went to the uncle. It was a blessed ending to a story of sorrow. But loving hearts won the day.

Keeping that in mind, let's look at the Gospel. Context here is that Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead and has made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The disciples must have been on a high. And a lot of people must have been talking about Jesus. Hence the text says that some Greeks appear and say to Philip, "Sir, we want to see Jesus." You'll note that it doesn't say whether they did or not, but if Jesus had gotten the message, perhaps he would have said something like, "They want to see me, do they? Tell them to stick around for a few days and they'll be able to see what God's about – they'll be able to see God's heart – God's love and empathy, God's sorrow and forgiveness, and finally, God's triumph over sin and death.

When we read these texts now and during Holy Week, I think it's pretty nearly impossible for us to imagine what the disciples must have been thinking. All of our understanding is colored by the knowledge of the Resurrection, but theirs wasn't. So when Jesus says that the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified, I'm betting that they are thinking, "YEAH, ABOUT TIME!!! Now those Romans are going to get theirs." And we'd probably be confused if we were in their shoes, too. It's all wrapped up in that word, "glorified." What do we think when we hear that? I'm guessing we think about fame and power, about someone being held up as an example, as a success story, someone to admire and imitate. That's about vain-glory and narcissism and ego. But from Jesus' point of view, that's human thinking – that's thinking like what he's referring to when he says that "the ruler of the world will be driven out." Because for Jesus to be glorified means to reveal the essence of God – to show us the very heart of God, how deeply God loves and what God's kind of power and love look like. In the first instance, it looks like that kind of self-emptying that will mean crucifixion. But not just crucifixion and death because, even here, Jesus is talking about the kind of death that will result in new and more abundant life. The disciples don't get it but, to be fair, how could they?

A note about John's Gospel. You'll remember at Christmas time when we always read the prologue to the Gospel – in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God. John's theology is one in which Jesus Christ began with God and then descended to earth to participate in our humanity. After his death and resurrection, he ascends to heaven once again. C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

In the Christian story, God descends to re-ascend. He comes down, from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity. But he goes down to come up again

and bring the whole ruined world with him....One may think of a diver first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he bursts the surface again, holding in his hand the dripping precious thing he went down to recover. He and it are both colored now that they have come up into the light. (*Miracles*, C.S. Lewis)

Pre-Resurrection, the disciples undoubtedly wanted a super-hero kind of God. I was sitting next to someone at the poverty collaboration workshop who had a notebook. On the cover it said, "I forgot my cape." Well, the disciples were probably waiting for Jesus to get rid of his Clark Kent disguise and put on his superman cape. They would not have put "glorification" and "vulnerability" together. And we, even though we have the benefit of knowing the end of the story of knowing about the resurrection, I think we, too, still have a hard time holding those two together.

So, there is it. Do we want those new hearts? Do we want to see Jesus and then follow him, no matter what? At the retreat a couple of weeks ago, Marcia and Mike talked about the radical generous love of St. Francis and one of the participants said, speaking for all of us, I'm sure, that that kind of total love and devotion scares us.

We're nearing the end of Lent. Perhaps we could think about this a bit and ask for the courage to pray for that kind of love – for those new hearts. And here maybe the collect that we began with can be our guide: that God give us the grace to love what God commands and to desire what God promises. If we do that, then God's deepest desires and ours will be in sync. John would call that living in eternal life right now.

Amen.