

## SERMON LENT 5B - WESLEY, 9.00 & 10.30 - 29/3/09

In recent weeks we have thought about the covenant God made with Noah and symbolized by the rainbow. Then we thought about the ten commandments and the rules for life that God made for the people. Today, our first reading was from the prophet Jeremiah in which God tells of a time in which there will be a **new** covenant. This time it would be different because it would be written on the hearts of the people instead of on stone like the ten commandments.

The old covenants were external covenants. You can't get much more external than the symbol of the rainbow! The new would be internalized and we now know it as the way in which God's Spirit lives within us. At Pentecost, we will remember the first occasion when the Spirit came on the gathered group of Christians. God had sent Jesus to bring the good news of God's grace for all and after his death people realized that Jesus truly had been from God.

Jesus told the Greek enquirers that they had to be like seed and die before they could bear fruit. He didn't mean seed that is no longer viable. Rather, he was using the imagery of the seed being buried in the ground and then germinating. Some seeds will yield a prolific number of fruits and seeds in turn. This analogy was a lesson as to what would be the fate of Jesus. He would die and after burial, would rise again and then his message would be taken by his disciples to many more people. Eventually, of course, the fruits of Jesus' ministry on earth was the church worldwide.

Jesus said that those who love their life will lose it and those who hate their life will keep it for eternity. People who want to do Jesus's will must do as he did. And of course the readers of John's gospel know what the result of Jesus' commitment to follow the will of God was. It was the crucifixion.

Persecution and death are an extreme price to pay but all who follow Jesus must be prepared to die to their old ways of living. Only then can someone live in the new way. Do we hold on to old ways too much? Power, prestige and ego are important for many and very difficult to give up. If a person holds on to such things too strongly what are the consequences? Do we lie, cover up, hurt others all for the sake of holding on to or increasing our power, prestige or egos? One of those aphorisms we learnt as children was "pride comes before a fall". It is sad when we see once highly regarded public figures in disgrace because they had put too much value on prestige or power.

A great classic recounting of the way a person can go so wrong is the Confessions of St Augustine. He tells of how even as a child he wanted to be popular with his friends and so he stole food from his parents to give to the friends. He let his own desires rule. Later, as a young man, he let lust and desire for enjoyment rule his life, disregarding the words of God spoken to him through his mother.

How much emphasis do we place on others and how much on ourselves? Two writers, the Jewish leader, Johathan Sacks and the Protestant, William Willimon both condemn the current emphasis on the self. 'I want', 'I choose', 'I feel'. Advertising targets selfish desires, works on feelings that the individual is all that matters. Sacks says that there has been a collapse of moral language with the disappearance of 'I ought'. The community can't argue with 'I want' – only with 'I ought'. Sacks is concerned at the way TV works on our emotions. Visual images sell stories, reasoned argument doesn't. So reporters love confrontation and violence. Deep thoughtful responses to matters are ignored. Look at the ratings differences between serious, deep thoughtful programs and soaps or sport.

Even within our church worship, Willimon sees this selfish, superficial approach in the sort of songs which stress the personal singular pronoun – 'I', 'me', 'my' – as just an extension of the secular world. Some sing words like 'I want to be near you' because they are so used to thinking 'I want', 'I desire' ...

But in the Bible, the emphasis is on what God wants and our response to that. If Jesus had done what **he** wanted, he would have quietly escaped from Jerusalem. He prayed to God "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want". When we listen to what God wants of us, then we think in terms of 'I ought' and we have the moral language with which to debate issues. We can think about how God's will applies to each situation.

Jesus told us to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves. The current emphasis on the individual in Western society has gone too far. As a result, there are problems such as NIMBY ideas. NIMBY – not in my backyard. Yes it would be good to have special housing for handicapped adults, but not next door to me –that would lower my property value. . Yes it would be good to look after the world, but not if it means that my lifestyle would be changed. Of course if nothing is done, all our lifestyles will be forced to change even more but too many won't think of others or think past the present.

When God's law was external, then people had to work hard at it and constantly failed. As Christians we are asked to take God's Spirit into our hearts. The difficulty is in emptying our hearts of our own wills and desires so that all that is there is the will of God. We don't actually do that and that is where we fall short of the perfect. We always retain something of our own wishes. If we could really empty our hearts and minds of our own wishes then we **could** not do other than the will of God.

Nevertheless, the more we do eliminate our own desires, then the more room we will have for God and the more our wishes will coincide with those of God. It will become natural to do good, to care for others, to fight for justice.

Think about the many aspects of our lives that become second nature so that we don't even think about them. We breathe without thinking unless we are ill. Once we are past the toddler stage, most of us walk without thinking through each step. But injury can change that. If every movement has to be

thought through and is painful, there is a temptation to give up, to slow down or fail to make the effort. When God's relationship with people was external, and the laws external ones to be learnt, then there was always room for mistakes, for giving up, for finding it all too difficult. For thinking, 'well in **my** case it's a bit different', to plead special circumstances and excuse ourselves. But God's law in our hearts is different. That becomes like breathing or walking. Then when there are whole communities in which the people have God's law in their hearts there are wonderful opportunities.

Like the seed, Jesus, one person, by being faithful to the end, was able to bring forth new life in the community. Many of the early church members encouraged others so that they each became like seeds growing and producing many more. But for this to happen, Christians have to die to their own desires. Power to be used only for our own advancement and prestige to make us feel important as individuals have to die. These are egotistical desires. Even when we dress them up as being for our family, it is still egotistical.

The Lenten studies which some of us are doing has a prayer for this week which speaks of the way, when the grain of self dies within us, God transforms our hearts into bread for a hungry world. May some grains of self die within each of us this Lent so that our lives can bring nourishment to others. Amen