

SERMON: 2018/03/18 (5th Sunday in Lent, Year B) - Jeremiah 31:31-34 & John 12:20-33\_BTR

[Invite the children to sit at the front.]

These words - *of God* - are some of my favourite in the *whole* Bible. He tells his servant, the prophet Jeremiah, that He will take '[His] law' and 'write it on their hearts', [Jer. 31:33].  
Now, what does He mean?

Well, have you ever played the game 'Operation'?  
You know, the one with the naked man and the big, red nose that buzzes?  
With that in mind, does God mean He was going to take a massive, heavenly pen, cut people open, and write the "ten commandments" onto people's insides?  
*No!*  
That'd be *gross!*  
And messy.  
And very, *very* unpleasant.  
So, not at all the kind of thing that our God - who 'is love' [1 Jn. 4:8b] - would do.  
What, therefore, *does* He mean?

*I* think the meaning is clear:  
the law, remember, was written on two, hard "tablets," which were carried around in the ark.  
And men and women would come and consult them, and debate and argue with one another as whether this thing or that thing was permissible or not; God-pleasing or not. And the thing is, let's be honest, as good and sensible as the Commandments were, they weren't very...winning - *to those who were looking to ignore them*. They weren't endearing. They just stared out at the Israelites. Cold. Grey. *Silent*.  
There was nothing about the laws that made you *want* to obey them. They weren't *attractive*.  
And this was a problem.

The Bible says that human creatures - us - that we're '*inclined*' to do what's not good for us, [Phil. 3:19].  
To do things for (immediate) pleasure that, in the "long-run" hurt and destroy and demean.  
And God, to help us out of that 'trap' [1 Tim. 6:9], decided to do something even better than just giving us *written* rules, He gave us a person: Jesus - who would *inspire* us by His sacrificial goodness to *want* to be better than we are!

His example *changes* how we feel - it changes or *moves* our 'hearts', [Jer. 31:33b].

So, when we look at the cross and reflect on how He must have suffered really badly 'to set us free from sin and death' [Rom. 8:2], we will *choose* to follow the rules God has given to us.

Let us pray: Father God, ...

[Ask children to leave.]

Judea - or "Palestine," as the Romans re-named it - was a very odd place. From the perspective of the other people of the empire, that is:

Most of Caesar's subjects - and by 'most' I mean 99.9% - worshipped many gods; many, many, *many* gods.

There were gods for everything.

A god of the moon and of the harvest, another one of hunting, and not just of those things but even of shoes, and of the sewers, and for flatulence...

The list was endless.

Individual families even had private deities - *personal* gods.

And these beings were, according to the prevailing mythology, very *human*-like in their behaviour and attitudes:

They were spiteful and murderous.

Lustful, unfaithful and deceitful.

And yet, despite being *horribly* flawed and unworthy of worship, they demanded - so it was thought - to be regularly appeased and cajoled by a *constant* stream of *costly* animal sacrifice in temples and shrines, which stood in every neighbourhood and on every street-corner.

And then, given these widely-held depraved religious notions, there was widespread hedonism and violence in the cities and the provinces.

And this was how it was pretty much everywhere.

Everywhere, that is, except among the Jews.

They had *one* God.

And *one* temple.

*One* priesthood.

Men married *one* wife and divorce was exceedingly uncommon.

Gluttony and partying, orgies and prostitution existed as elsewhere to be sure, but were *vanishingly* rare (in comparison).

And sacrifice, whilst still a big business in the capital, Jerusalem, took place only there, and was a feature of only a few holy days, rather than a daily butchery.

And all this made their country a place of extreme curiosity to their *Gentile*

compatriots:

imagine how the Amish would feel stumbling into New Orleans during Mardi Gras. Invert that situation, and this is how the 'Greeks' felt who are mentioned in today's gospel reading.

They're tourists in an alien place.

Like American mid-westerners on a visit to Japan.

Eager, curious, *confused*.

And in spite of all the *tremendous* hustle and bustle of the city - it is, remember, a 'festival' [v.20] - they notice that one speaker was attracting a great deal of attention, and this, of course, was Jesus.

Now, the fact that Christ was preaching and "*theologising*" on the street - in public - isn't itself noteworthy:

There were always lots of soothsayers and doom-mongers competing for the interest of those passing by there.

And that's part of the strange spectacle that has drawn these travellers from Greece.

But Christ seems to have been especially interesting to them, and so, certainly intrigued by the (size of the) 'crowd' [v.29] He had drawn and, perhaps, by some of what they heard Him saying, they asked for a *private* audience, [n.1].

Now, for them, as Greeks, to request this is a cliché of almost laugh-out-loud comedic proportions:

They play straight into their national stereotype!

In Britain, for example, we caricature Americans as all being loud and obnoxious; and Germans as unsentimental, efficient, punctual, etcetera.

Well, (ancient) Greece was a nation exceptional for the abundance of sages, poets and orators it produced:

To *talk* - to theorize and debate and question..., *this* was their excellence; their blood and oxygen.

Notice that they approach *Philip*, a Jew, yes, but with a Grecian name.

Maybe they thought he was a countryman?

And, thinking that, thought he would respond sympathetically to their approach for an extended, *philosophical* conversation of the kind that they were famous for?

But not only does he *not* immediately comply, he goes to Andrew (instead) and asks *him* to pass the message along to their rabbi.

So, why?

Why his hesitance? His nervousness for asking Jesus to meet with these foreigners?

Is it xenophobia?

*Racism?*

Yes.

Jesus' disciples were real people with real prejudices and biases; and these were exacerbated by a belief that they *alone* - as the descendants of Abraham, uniquely enfolded - *embraced* - by Moses' (Sinai-atic) covenant, were of consequence - of concern - to the One whose 'voice came from heaven' in verse 28.

And certainly they had - *and continue to have* [Rom. 11:29] - a singular, *privileged* place in God's plan for removing the "darkness" and distortion in His creation.

And let's not neglect the perplexing fact that Jesus Himself, of course, showed only occasional interest in the Gentiles that crossed His "path."

How would He react this time?

He responds like this:

He says, "...when I am lifted up from the earth, [I] will draw all people to myself."  
And this is the answer, but what is the meaning?

Undoubtedly, He is referring, *prophetically*, to His impending death up on a cross, which involved nailing a body to a (wooden) beam high enough above the ground that it could hang with the feet unable to support its weight.

(It was for this reason that when a bystander brought a drink for Jesus as he was dying, that to reach his mouth they had to stick the sponge 'on a stick', [Mk. 15:36].)

And what He suggests is that there is something about this event - this happening to Him, which would make men and women pause and take notice; arouse their curiosity; cause them to *lean in* and want to know more.

Because here's the paradox: as horrifically *repellant* as the manner of His execution was, the fact that He *chose* it - remember: in chapter 10 of this gospel, only moments earlier than this very episode that we're discussing, He spoke of Himself as the 'good shepherd' who willingly lays down His life for the sake of the sheep in His care - this is so *bizarre* - such 'foolishness' admits Saint Paul, [1 Cor. 1:18] - that it *provokes* questions; *arouses* curiosity.

*Who* would do such a thing?

A *rare* person indeed.

Someone of *absolute* conviction; of *absolute confidence*.

And Jesus calls this gruesomeness, "glory."

How can that be?

For us - for *Christians* - the puzzling, impactful enigma which is Christ's crucifixion

can lose its mystique.

But for those unfamiliar with it, we need to have faith that it retains - *possesses* - awesome power to *draw* them into conversations and places where they find themselves closer to God and His love.

We need to trust that, just as Jeremiah predicted, the sacrifice of the "Lamb" can still change hearts even today.

That the story of the universe-maker coming down into our world so as to be raised up, when we share it, captures imaginations - *and entire lives(!)* - and 'bears much fruit'.

Let's reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Carson, D. A. (1991), *The Gospel According to John*, Leicester: Apollos (Inter-Varsity Press), 437.