

Jeremiah 31 v31-34

John 12 v20-33

In some parts of the country, you may see fields, which are bright green. If you do so, then they may be fields of winter wheat. Last autumn, when all the harvest had been carried in and the fields ploughed and fertilized, the farmers began the whole cycle again. What they did was to plant the grain. Thousands of seeds were scattered – not by hand as in biblical times – but by modern machinery. Nevertheless, in the age-old way, each grain needed to drop into the ground and die to itself. It would need to be buried, then to split in order that new life could spring out. We see that new life now as blades of green; hopefully by autumn that green blade will have grown and developed an ear with many more seeds than the one which was planted.

Of course, this is no new phenomenon. Jesus walked through the countryside of his own homeland and he must have observed the wonder of dry looking grains being scattered and bright green blades growing up. He obviously meditated on this, and many times used natural occurrences as a way of teaching very deep truths.

He taught us that just as the grain died to give a rich harvest, so His followers must be prepared to die to themselves in order to live for God. They must be prepared to deny themselves and follow Jesus who promised that if they did so, his Father would honour them.

The challenge made by Jesus to His disciples, is also a challenge to us today. This is an age in which we are encouraged by the media and by advertising to think of ourselves. Part of the economic trouble the world is undergoing at present, is down to the fact that we are bombarded

with adverts suggesting to us to have it now and not to wait. (e.g., You know you are worth it type of thing).

The call of the world is to think of ourselves, to grab what we want, and to push others to one side if they stand in the way. The call of Jesus, however, is to die to our greed, our self-seeking, our push to get what we want, and instead to sacrifice ourselves for others, to put them first, to have an attitude of service and self-sacrifice. When Jesus said this, he was not asking anything of others that he did not do himself. His whole life was one of self-emptying and self-sacrifice. It culminated, as we know in the ultimate self-sacrifice – his death on the cross.

Yet it was by being lifted up in pain on the cross, that He revealed the eternal suffering love of God, and indeed draws us to Himself.

You know, it's not that long ago that we celebrated Christmas. Now Easter is almost upon us. While these two events are celebrated at different times and in very different ways, they are both integral parts of God's initiative in His grand plan for salvation.

A man called Peter Larson wrote: "Despite our efforts to keep Him out, God intrudes. The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin's womb and an empty tomb.

Jesus entered our world through a door marked "No Entrance" and left through a door marked "No Exit."

The Lord did not wait for an invitation to enter our world. Clothed with humanity, He lived as our teacher, died as our sacrifice, and rose from the grave as our Saviour.

Our passage from Jeremiah this morning is regarded as one of the most important in the Old Testament. This is so because it contains the future covenant, or if you like, promise. This is not an additional piece of legislation from God, but part of the continuing relationship he has with his people.

To be clear, Jeremiah is not criticizing the earlier covenants God made with the people, but Jeremiah does note that there was failure to keep to the covenant. However, Jeremiah here is quite upbeat and positive. Many folks refer to Jeremiah as the “wailing prophet”. To be honest, I think that’s a bit unfair. There are certainly some passages where he doesn’t pull his punches. But he is only being faithful to God. The people needed to hear just where they were in their relationship with God the Father. Jeremiah’s book and his life are a single unit. He wrote what he lived, and he lived what he wrote.

He went through some difficult times. For many folks going through difficult times, Jeremiah is the prophet of choice, because they want trustworthy advice in knowing what to think, how to pray, how to carry on.

Jeremiah lived through one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history, including a period of exile.

We live in strange times. Anyone who lives in disruptive times looks for a companion who has been through such experiences earlier. They want to know how they went through it, how they made it, and what it was like.

In looking for a companion who has lived through disruption and survived with grace, you could do a lot worse than to have a look

through Jeremiah. Those who do, find the book to be true, honest and God revealing.

The old covenant of the Old Testament was in many ways, a covenant of law. It was a covenant between God and the people of Israel. Now this was sealed by the blood of animals and based on the expectation that the people would keep the commandments. However, people tended to focus on, that is, the legal side of things. Yet at the same time, it was a covenant of Grace.

What is often forgotten is that the laws of the Old Testament laid particular stress on compassion.

Slavery was limited to six years, charging interest on loans was prohibited, there were arrangements to cancel debts and provision made for foreigners. Perhaps in 2000, you remember the Year of Jubilee? The idea was to cancel the debts of third world countries. It harked back to a year of rest

observed by the Israelites every 50th year, during which slaves were to be set free, alienated property restored to the former owners, and the lands left untilled.

The covenants were ways of encouraging the people to respond to God's gracious acts in a similar way.

Well, the people failed to respond to the old covenant as God wanted.

As a result, God placed them in exile. Now, Jeremiah felt that they deserved this, but he also promised that out of the death of the exile, new life would spring. He promised a new covenant relationship, not just between God and the people, but also between God and each individual. Verse 31 says, "I shall make a new covenant with the people

of Israel and Judah.” This new covenant would mean that each person would know God for him or herself.

It’s worthwhile just thinking about that promise. This is why this passage is so important then and to us now.

What Jeremiah is saying is that each person would be responsible to God. No longer would it be enough just to hide within the mass of the nation and blame others. Each individual must play their part in upholding the structures of grace for the good of others.

When Jesus died for us, we were given the greatest of gifts, though we often fail to comprehend this, and our response, therefore, is perhaps not as it should be.

Listen to this story I came across a while ago now.

A doctor was working in a remote area of Minnesota USA many years ago, when a Native American family begged him to come and help their elderly grandmother who was gravely ill. He went, diagnosed her condition, and then gave detailed instructions for her care.

The woman recovered, and a few weeks later, the entire family made the journey to the doctor’s office in town. They ceremoniously presented him with a 150-year-old pair of moccasins made by a great-great grandfather. When the doctor protested because the gift was cherished and valuable, the head of the clan replies, “You saved my mother’s life.

We insist that you accept these moccasins. We do not express great appreciation with a cheap gift.”

By definition, a sacrifice has a cost. So, if we’re going to give to the Lord, we should do so generously.

So, what does this New Covenant of self giving, self-sacrifice look like? How can we know how to apply it in our lives? Well, we need look no further than Jesus. In His living and His dying the terms of the New Covenant became clear. It points clearly, not to the wrath of God, but to His infinite love.

Today we move into the last two weeks of Lent. A time sometimes referred to as Passiontide.

At Passiontide, it is traditional to give particular attention to prayer and meditation on Christ's self-giving and death. It is a time when we should consider dying to ourselves and to live for others and God. As we walk in prayer and meditation in the steps of Jesus, so we can learn to follow his example of self giving and be prepared to pour ourselves out in service to those around us – especially those who are marginalized and rejected.

You know, the cost of living for others may be high and we might find it difficult. But you see, the call comes from God, whose Son Jesus did this to the full.

He doesn't call us to do anything he did not do himself. We might make mistakes, but it's worth trying. Jesus will give us the strength to follow his example.

As we progress into Easter, this New Covenant puts the journey of Jesus into perspective. Here is a man who gives himself for others that he might find himself in God. It is not simply a matter that he does it for us; rather we are invited to embrace and be embraced by this new relationship and find our place in the safety and provision of God.

Amen.