Jeremiah and the New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:31-34 "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt --- a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each

other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

If you have been following the news these last few months, you will know that there are various voices out there predicting all kinds of trouble in the days ahead, ongoing economic distress and hardship, political turmoil in a divided nation, and more religious conflicts and wars around the globe. These modern day ‘prophets of doom’ are warning us all to pay attention to what is going on around us. So, to whom should we listen among these many different voices? Who can we believe in this age of false news and propaganda? Who’s got it right?

This cacophony of different voices saying different things with different predictions about the future is, of course, nothing new. In the sixth century before Christ, we can hear from the original ‘prophets of doom,’ from Jeremiah and Ezekiel. For in the year 598 Before the Common Era, after a three-month siege, the king of Judah surrendered to the armies of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who then emptied his royal and temple treasuries, and carted off back to Babylon the Jewish king and his queen mother, and all the leading figures of the Jewish society, leaving only the peasants behind to tend the land.

Ezekiel, the prophet, was one of those deported. And Ezekiel spent the rest of his days prophesying to the Jews in captivity, trying to explain to them what had happened and what would happen in the days ahead. He was the counterpart to Jeremiah, who remained behind in Jerusalem after that first deportation. Each of these prophets called their respective audiences to repent and to change their ways, and each of them foretold even greater doom and destruction of their land and the people if they did not. However, the people would not believe these ancient prophets of doom and listened to others instead, false prophets telling them what they wanted to hear. For the Jewish people could not believe that their beloved Jerusalem, which had survived a long siege by the Assyrians a few hundred years before, would ever actually fall to the Babylonians or to anyone else for that matter. For Jerusalem was the greatest city in the world; it was the city of David, the city of God. Sound familiar? Sound like some conceited Americans claiming the United States to be the greatest country in the world, claiming American exceptionalism for ourselves and declaring how God is on our side?

Jeremiah agonized over his people's incurable conceit, as I do over ours sometimes. The Jews were, he said, a "people with a stubborn and rebellious heart" (5.23). Writing some of the most beautifully lyrical passages in the Old Testament, Jeremiah

expressed his fears for the future, if they did not change their ways, and yet they would not. And sure enough, eleven years later in the year 587 Before the Common Era, Nebuchadnezzar's army returned once again to quell another rebellion among those overly confident Judeans, and this time there was a very long and a very deadly siege of Jerusalem. Bread was so scarce that the people resorted to cannibalism, revealed the Scriptures (Lam. 4.10). Death stalked the streets and came in at the windows (9.21), wrote Jeremiah, who had prophesied this doom, and so Jeremiah was arrested, beaten, and thrown into prison for being 'unpatriotic' in today's terms (37.11-5). Then he was moved to the court of the royal guard, who demanded that he be put to death, but no one dared. So instead, they lowered Jeremiah down by ropes into a cistern and left him there to die in the mire, as the siege continued. After the fall of the city, Jeremiah was rescued by the invading Babylonians, who had by then completely burned down the city of Jerusalem and destroyed stone by stone the once great Temple of King Solomon and the Royal Palace of King David, and then carried off the few survivors among the Jews to join those in exile in Babylon where the Jewish people all remained for many, many years.

And what did the people say once Jerusalem had been destroyed and they were carted off into exile? Did they then repent and acknowledge their faults and turn to the Lord as the

prophets had encouraged them to do? No, no, they who had refused to believe the prophetic warnings, when doom and destruction finally did befall them, what did they do, they blamed their parents! They simply repeated the popular proverb of that day, that "The parents have eaten sour grapes, but it is the children's teeth which are set on edge." For the Jews in exile complained that it wasn't *their* fault that they were in captivity and their country destroyed, but the fault of their forebears and the political alliances that their parents had made, and yet they *the poor children* had to bear the burden of their parents' decisions and actions. "The way of the Lord is not just," they whined, "God is not fair." Sound familiar?

And so, it is that we arrive at today's Old Testament reading, where Jeremiah, like Ezekiel in Babylon, dismisses once and for all the old Mosaic theme that God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children. No, no, say these prophets. God rewards or punishes us for our own deeds alone. Jeremiah exhorts that the individual is responsible before God for his own actions. The individual, however bad his or her forebears had been, can escape ultimate doom by leading a good life and following the Commandments. It is God's will that every individual should fulfill in himself or herself the requirements of the covenant. If your teeth are set on edge, Jeremiah said, then it is you who have reaped sour grapes. Jeremiah wrote,

"Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his (own) ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions lest iniquity be your ruin . . . For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God; so turn, and live," choose life.

Israel, said Jeremiah, was like clay in the potter's hand. If the vessel was spoiled, the potter could rework the clay into another vessel as the potter saw fit. This is what God was going to do with the people of Israel. And Jeremiah then prophesied a new covenant (31.31-4), not written on tablets of stone as was the old covenant with Moses on Mt. Sinai. "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest says the Lord," for I will write this new covenant on their hearts.

This anticipation of a new age and a new covenant assumed greater and greater significance in the years after the fall of Jerusalem, and eventually assumed a central place in the New Testament of the early Christians (I Cor. 11.25; Lk. 22.20; Heb. 8.8-12). Indeed, the New Testament takes its very name from these prophecies of Jeremiah, since Jeremiah's prophecies of a new covenant were echoed in the words and parables and stories of Jesus, where for instance at the Last Supper, Jesus himself "took a cup . . . saying, 'Drink this, all of you; for this cup

is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (1 Cor. 11.25; Lk. 22.20; Mt. 26.26-8). For Christians, the new covenant became actualized in Jesus, who became the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, prophecies of God's forgiveness and reconciliation.

So, whom should we listen to in our own day? Whom can we believe? Who's got it right? Those who speak of a God of love and forgiveness and mercy have got it right, and those who warn us that we alone are responsible for our own actions, that we cannot blame our parents or the generation before us or 'those people' or 'that political party'! We all know what is right and wrong, for the new covenant is written upon our hearts. As our former Presiding Bishop would always say, "if it isn't about love, then it isn't about God!" We all know, at least to some extent, what is right and wrong and how we meant to treat each other, though we so often fail to do what we know we ought to do, and to refrain from things which we know we ought not to do. And so then, we struggle together to enhance our understanding of that new covenant written on our hearts and to do better. The early church got this much right, that that 'new' covenant can be found in the words and parables and deeds in the life of Jesus, which is why the early church called those stories "The New Testament, a simply a synonym for the "New Covenant." AMEN.