**“Written on the Heart”**

*AFC audio & live worship 21.3.21*

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

**John 12:26-36**

*The Message Bible*

“Poetry takes me out of my head and puts me back in my heart” – said a minor character in a film I was watching a few days ago. She was a poet and she was trying to explain to a friend, what poetry meant to her. Although the definition of head and heart in ancient Israel were not quite the same as we would now define them, yet the distinction made here may help us to understand some of what we heard in our first Bible reading; the fact that there are different ways of comprehending reality. And that what is true of poetry or art or music, may also be true of our faith.

We are now approaching the end of our Lenten journey and in our OT reading the Lectionary takes us back to the prophet Jeremiah, who has already given us a very hopeful New Year’s message at the beginning of this year. In fact, today’s passage comes from the same chapter, which is part of the so-called Book of Comfort within the Book of Jeremiah. It explores further the promise of newness the people of Israel are given by God as they are getting ready to come out of their traumatic exile in Babylon. It is a beautiful, but not an easy passage to understand aright. Although Jeremiah says *“The days are coming, when the people of God will no longer need to teach one another”* *(Jer 31:34)* yet, paradoxically, we find that, we still need some teaching when it comes to knowing God and knowing ourselves.

Traditionally, Lent has always been a time to examine our relationship with God as we recall Jesus’ time in the wilderness. The main subject of these verses is the relationship between God and God’s people looking at it through the mirror of the *covenant.* Itmay be helpfulfor usto reflect on the experience of our ancestors in the faith in this matter. It would be easy to think about covenants by saying that the old covenant was for Israel and the new covenant for Christians who become part of it through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. But we may have to rethink this, for here we are, confronted with the first mention of the new covenant in the Bible and it comes from Jeremiah in the middle of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Even within these few verses there is a hint of a whole history of covenants binding God and God’s people together. God had made covenants with Noah with Abram, with King David, with the whole of Israel through Moses and in our passage we hear about a new covenant directed specifically to the House of Judah languishing in Babylon. In some sense, these agreements are different, just as parents would use different teaching with their different children and at different stages of their development. The method may change but the love that dictates it remains the same. So, without going into details of all the previous covenants, the first thing they together may teach us is that our God is a covenant-making God, who never gives up on us, not as individuals, not as nations, not as humanity. God’s covenants are not closed units, they are open-ended. Again and again there are newer and newer ways the divine hand is trying to guide God’s people.

It is well demonstrated in this passage we are looking at, where the Hebrew expression used for ‘new covenant’ could also be translated as a ‘renewed covenant’. It points to the understanding that the underlying law of love has not changed from God’s side, only the way of comprehending it by the people has been made easier, more intimate, for ‘after those days’ it will be written on their hearts. ‘Written on the heart’ is a lovely image and a great message because it takes account of the frailty of God’s people, who constantly fail to live up to the law of love and it affirms God’s initiative to deal with the problem from the inside. It means the relationship with God is not to be perceived as merely obeying rules coming from outside, carved in stone. Rather it is to be found in the depth of every fully alive, pulsating human heart put there by a grace-filled, loving covenant partner. Just like a love-token of a golden heart given to someone with some writing or image inside.

Our Lenten discipline of reflection and self-examination taps into this idea when we follow our Lord in trying to sort out what’s inside us, and it may have a particular poignancy this year. Like Israel at the time of Jeremiah we too are looking forward to coming out of, not only a national, but a world-wide crisis. We may all have experienced the past twelve months differently, but it’s safe to say that none of us have been un-effected by it. And the question in all our minds is, where do we go from here?

Well, Jeremiah knew a thing or two about disrupted lives, hopelessness and disarray. He had to minister at a time when the old order collapsed and there was no visible way out of the crisis. No wonder that even he often doubted God and doubted himself, he argued with God and sometimes he despaired. Yet when he spoke with such authority of God’s law being written on the human heart, he also spoke out of personal experience. For in spite of all the turmoil of his own life and against the background of his nation’s tragedies, somehow he found just enough faith in his heart to sustain him and carry on living by that faith. His head might have told him that things may never work out, and actually, for him they never did, - but looking into his heart, he knew he had to act according to the light within.

In our Gospel reading Jesus also talks about this new covenant, he calls it the light within and urges his followers to *believe* in that light, to *live b*y that light and to let it *shine through* their lives. With hindsight Jesus’ followers recognised that he himself lived by that light and that even beyond his earthly life he became the light written on their hearts and guided them through good and bad.

In 2011 the Swan Theatre at Stratford-upon-Avon premiered a new play by David Edgar called “*Written on the Heart”.* It was a production commemorating the 400th Anniversary of the King James Bible, and it was a dramatic depiction of the religious and political controversy that surrounded that event. There is a memorable sentence in it by the Archdeacon of Winchester, who is trying to make peace between the two main protagonists William Tyndale and Bishop Lancelot Andrewes. The old cleric says: “Truly, only love and mercy comprehend the law. And he, who has not that written on his heart shall never truly come to Christ, though all the angels taught him”.

Love and mercy is the essence of God’s law and according to both Testaments we all have access to it when in a Lenten spirit we ask God to put us back into our hearts. As we continue our worship now with broken bread and poured out wine, we give thanks for the gift of this intimate knowledge of God within us and ask for the wisdom to rightly discharge the responsibility that it also confers on us. So that God may be our God and we may be God’s people. Let it be so.