

Lent 5, 2015

Chaplain John

Jeremiah 31: 31 – 34, Hebrews 5: 5 – 10, John 12: 20 - 33

"Sir, we want to see Jesus."

Jesus was already gaining a reputation as someone very different from the traditional run of prophets and preachers. Most of these ranted on about the evils of society and warned of dire consequences unless their message was accepted. They often focused on the Jewish people, making much of what was perceived as their unique and privileged place with God, whereas Jesus embraced a wider world view, extending the love and grace of God to people of all nations.

It's hard for us to imagine the rigid racial separatism of those times, but for Jesus to reach out to non-Jews was a very radical approach that brought him both accolades and derision.

The Greeks who approached Philip – who had a Greek name – probably after the town of Philippi – found themselves more comfortable with him. Philip tells Andrew and together they introduce the Greeks to Jesus. We hear no more of these visitors directly, but they illustrate the wider influence of Jesus, fulfilling the Pharisees' criticism that the whole world has gone after him.

Jesus moves to announce that his time has come and that although he is to be subject to the most degrading treatment and death following a farcical show trial which all involved knew was no more than dishonest circus Jesus describes these events as:

"The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Most certainly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains by itself alone. But if it dies it bears much fruit. He who loves his life will lose it. He who hates his life in this world will keep it to eternal life. If anyone serves me let him follow me. Where I am there will my servant also be. If anyone serves me the Father will honour him."

The season of Lent reminds us that we do live only for ourselves – indeed if we do we become of all the most lonely – we are not designed to be selfish, but self-loving. Nurturing and caring for ourselves is essential to the enjoyment of life and the growth of our faith.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant to follow the Mosaic one that the people had broken so often, leaving them scattered over half the Middle-east and seriously demoralised. Earlier he had reaffirmed God's promise that in spite of all that had gone wrong for them, "I have loved you with an everlasting love", under the new covenant they would be gathered together and their sins would be forgiven and remembered no more.

I have been corresponding on Facebook with Glynn Cardy, previously Vicar of St. Matthew's in the City and now of St. Luke's Presbyterian church in Remuera. They have placed an Easter notice on the board declaring, 'Jesus did **not** die for our sins'. Glynn notes that Jesus died for his sins against the Roman and Jewish authorities by not accepting their hypocritical jealous deceptions and their envy of Jesus' success with the common people.

When I worked with the young people on the streets of Christchurch the greatest sins any of their number could commit was to tell the Police about any unlawful activity. The hard drinking old men in the Night Shelter would cut off any of their number who successfully broke the pattern and became sober. Sobriety was their greatest sin.

A vast array of social and cultural sins are imposed by our cultures and our heritage. Some of these are reinforced – even created by our spiritual heritage. I have just finished reading 'The Fishing Fleet', the stories of young British women sent out to find husbands in India before and during the days of the Raj. All were victims of highly restrictive cultures prevailing in Victorian Britain – and had the rigid prevailing social mores of their times heavily reinforced by the churches. There was absolutely the proper way to do everything and to fail at it was an appalling disgrace.

They were also almost totally ignorant of sexual knowledge and were going to meet men who were often a decade or more older and were equally ignorant about women – with a few exceptions.

The women were either young, 18 – 22 or older, 25 plus and considered already on the shelf. They were often married within a few weeks after a few highly chaperoned meetings with their prospective husbands, who also had to follow the strict codes of social structures that prevailed. It was life crippled by often absurd rules, the breaking of which induced massive guilt with sometimes awful consequences. Hardly any of those rules had anything to do with the Christian faith, yet the expatriate Church in India, as did the Church back in Britain, reinforced them, showing how powerful culture can be in deciding what or what is not sin.

So before we accept guilt is there an adequate definition of sin, the breach of which we should feel guilty about?

God has created us all in the divine image; imparting to us three primary gifts which are characteristic of God.

These are total unconditional love towards every person ever born. With God there is no such person as an illegitimate person, no person defined by God as outcast or an alien or racially or culturally inferior or superior – all are equally loved, nurtured, empowered and challenged.

The second characteristic of God is freedom.

The whole universe is gifted with the freedom to develop as it will. As God's people we are also given that same freedom to do what we like. God never forces his will upon any person, never frogmarches us in the right direction – we are free as a human family to behave in a wholesome and humanitarian way, gracious and caring, thoughtful and sensitive, challenging and empowering of ourselves and others – or we can do the opposite, behaving so badly that we and others suffer and are deeply hurt, discriminated against or favoured unjustly – that is our freedom.

The third characteristic of God gifted to us is grace. Grace is the unmerited favour, the power of redemption, our capacity to forgive that enables us to not just forgive others, but to forgive ourselves. How easy it is to lie in bed torturing ourselves going over and over something we have done when God has long since forgiven it.

With grace we are freed from harbouring resentments and nurturing long-ago hurts. The pain and consequences of an earlier event may still affect us, but grace enables healing to take place.

So sin might be defined as any attitude or action that contradicts these three great realities of God's nature and through God's creation of us contradicts our nature as well.

Let's remember not to focus too much on our capacity for falling short – God knows us – our frailties and our strengths and affirms, encourages and blesses us so we may enjoy life to the full, to know love and wonder, beauty and mercy, passion and power.

Reflection through Lent is to release us from all that hinders our lives; teaching us to live with what we have gives us power to make change where change is necessary for our growth.

We are about to remember the last few days of Jesus' physical life among us; the amazing events of that final week, the grotesque travesty of justice that was his trial, followed by the transformational joy of his resurrection when death could not overpower life and hatred was defeated by love.

We have what we know as the Stations of the Cross that make Jesus journey to his execution. You are welcome to come up and take a station, three or four of you per station and place it on the wall of the church. It's a task for all of us and once you have one in place please return to your seat.

Next week Palm Sunday commemorates Jesus' arrival to great acclaim in Jerusalem, beginning a tumultuous seven days with profound significance for us all. Many of us have experienced a lot of Easter seasons, yet all of us can be moved again by a searching desire to 'see Jesus'. May we do so and be reaffirmed in our faith.