

Written on the heart*Jeremiah 31:27-34; Luke 18:1-8*

Living through a time of ups and downs, of despair and hope amongst the people of ancient Israel, the prophet Jeremiah anticipated a time when God will write on the hearts of people: what His laws, guidelines, hopes, expectations are. The God who watched over the world in a time of radical readjustment and what felt like brutal change also worked towards a time of building and planting.

As for the ancient Israelites, so also for us. As we learn to be accountable for who we are and what we have done, so we will find, when we have forgotten or doubted, that God still stands with us. Not because we deserve, but because God loves.

There are times, when life seems overwhelming: because of personal circumstance at home or at work, because of health or bereavement, broken promises or crushed hope, God still *IS*.

It is a familiar pattern from Bible times to our time. Dark times come. In personal and corporate lives there sometimes seems to be little if any hope. When all around seems impossible, burdensome, too much. Then into this darkness a voice speaks with news as unforeseen as was the news that caused darkness for us. The voice suggests there is light, no matter how deep the darkness seems. The irony is that it is only in the darkness that we are forced to seek out and ultimately be found by and see the light. Jeremiah lights that candle of hope for ancient Israelite exiles far, far from home in Babylon. ⁱ

I wonder if today from nearly three millennia ago, he does the same for us.

God reminds His people that He has a special relationship with them. When we would give up, God continues. When we would condemn without reprieve, God offers undeserved mercy. When

we would cut our losses and walk away, God says that He is not done with us and will come back, again. And again. And again if needs be. Until whatever that 'something' is within us responds, chimes in, awakens; and faith, even if it doesn't always make sense to us, becomes real to us.

It is that 'something within us' that seems to me to be important today. It has to do with attitude and mindset. It has to do with our ethics and principles. It has to do with the core, good things for which we are known. I once heard of a Church being described as a Church with a 'can do' mentality. One that knew how to marry big ideas with the necessary attention to small detail. One that didn't only talk but did. And one that didn't get so bogged down in minutiae that it lost the bigger vision of what it was trying to achieve. That's some feat. To realise that we need a big picture vision and not lose sight of the individual brushstrokes of necessary detail.

Are we a Church with a 'can do' mentality? Are you a person with a 'can do' mentality? Not unrealistic, and not all talk and no trousers, but not so nit-picking that, when finished, the life-force of an idea has been sucked dry. If you are like me, terrifying thought though that might be, you will swing from one to the other and back again. Desperately wanting to be positive and imaginative, but realising that realism and hard work are sobering necessities. When Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon hit the doormat, I wonder what the exiled Jews made of it. "Oh really, Jeremiah? We're homeless, poverty-stricken, exhausted, diminished, and you have the audacity to write to us about hope, and possibility, and new beginnings?"

'Yes I do', said Jeremiah. But not me. God'.

If we have even the slightest scintilla of faith, God will get to work. God will stir that essence of our lives, and orient us towards hope. *"I will write upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."*

What do you think God has written upon your heart? And by that I mean what are the words, ideas, practices that you have picked up along the way of life that make you, *you*? What are the core principles, beliefs, morality, ethics that shape you? What do you stand for? What do you believe in? How do you show it in the way you think, and you speak, and act? The good things about you that, perhaps greatly to your surprise, show that you, yes you, really are a child of God? Not some kind of external code, some set of laws or regulations, however important or necessary those might be. But something almost dangerously intimate. God's intimate relationship with you. What are you like? Not the bad stuff and the broken stuff and the disappointing stuff. But the good stuff and the wholesome stuff and the wonderful stuff.

In the last three weeks I have conducted five funerals, and one still to be organised. When I meet with upset families, grieving the loss of their loved one, once we've got the hymns and the other music and the readings and the names sorted out, we begin on the eulogy, the tribute. I will often ask, whether I know the deceased well or not, "If you were to begin to describe the person who has died to a stranger who had never met them, what would be the words you would use to start painting the picture?" Tell the truth, be honest. We can find euphemisms for the difficult bits. If you ever hear me say, 'Jeannie was a real character, and she was very forthright, and she absolutely knew her own mind, and didn't suffer fools gladly', well, it doesn't take Einstein to read between those lines about what she was like.

Then people start picking out the words. Not simply the good father, or gentle aunt, or loyal friend, but some of those, 'written on the heart words', that tell the story of what someone did, and of what someone was like. In other words, what was written on their hearts that found its way to their hands, their feet, their minds, their words, their actions, their lives. Who they were.

What has God written upon your heart? Who has God used in your life, down through the years, the parent or friend, the teacher or minister, the colleague or stranger, who has modelled for you, shown to you, told you the things that shape the kind of person you have become?

Who was the person who showed you what human decency looked like, and cost? Who was the person who forgave you, and inspired you to be more forgiving? Who was the person who planted within you your love of music, or literature, or sport, or science, or politics, or cooking, or gardening? Who was the person who taught you the hymns you love to sing? Who was the person who taught you the Lord's Prayer, and when did you learn it off by heart? Who were the people involved in the process of bringing you to faith, and keeping you there? What has God, through all of these things, through all of these people, written upon your heart? How, with all of those people, and with God, have you become the 'you' you are today? The best you.

God ultimately and always loves His children. He aches for our best and comes to our aid when we come to Him. *Unlike* the unjust judge, in Jesus' parable, who only issued justice to the persistent widow, God listens and responds. Jesus speaks of our need to pray always, *"and not to lose heart."* God does not wish woe for us, but weal.

In the intimate relationship Christians are meant to have with God might it be the case that one of the reasons, not the only one, that things sometimes go wrong for us is that we have drifted away from God and lost our heart? We no longer think about God, or speak about God, or speak *to* God. Not all of the time but some of the time. We drift from that special relationship we are supposed to have with God because it's too burdensome, or it's too out of step with the world, or we just plain forget it. When it slips away, for whatever reason, why are we surprised when things do not work out well? Is that what is wrong with the Church today? Is that what is wrong

with our country, our world today? Not an easy thought, and I don't think it tells the whole truth about what is going on, but might it be part of it?

Have we forgotten what God has written upon our hearts?

As believers, we have been afforded one of the greatest of privileges known to humans. We have the joy of sharing intimately with God. Making known all that we need and desire, confident that God will hear and answer prayer.

God knows what He has written upon our hearts, even when we forget.

When did you last read those words, and wonder what they say to you, and how they might, even now, help shape - everything.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ W Hulitt Gloer, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 4*, p171