

Sermon Lent 5 Year B 2018

Looking around at our world, our culture today - observing the movements in which people get caught up in and which define and shape a generation - one of things we might note is the *reluctance of so many people to commit to anything important*. You have probably heard something like that before. There is a trend - an observable and measurable movement - in which many people show an inability to hold to anything substantial for any length of time.

We see this in the reluctance of many people to marry. Relationships come thick and fast. But the idea of committing to one person in life-long fidelity is having a hard go at present. We see it in difficulty of attracting people to the priesthood and religious life. To be a priest or monk or nun requiring life-long commitment seems a pie-in-the-sky sort of notion. And where once a person would finish school and enter an occupation to be held for life, now many people - indeed most - will change their occupations several times over the course of their working life. All these just go to show how often times there are forces beyond our control that have great impact in how our lives unfold. But even short-term commitments are proving difficult. There is some evidence that with people being so 'connected' today - with constant distractions from technology - many people (and not just the young!) are being called away from their focus and the task at hand. Commitment is proving difficult for many in our world today.

As the pessimistic writer of Ecclesiastes tells us, there is *nothing new under the sun*, the struggle to commit is not unique to us. Commitment was also a difficulty for the people of Israel in their relationship with God. At the heart of the entire scriptural record is the notion of Covenant - a special kind of relationship where parties pledge themselves to each other. If we fail to understand something of this critical idea, then we will fail to understand anything of the Bible. Both the Old and New Testaments has this idea of 'covenant' as the central idea. Both the Old and New Testaments can be read as the unfolding story of covenant. It is the story of God's covenant with Israel (and in the New Testament, the New Israel - the Church) that is the thread that holds the whole Bible together.

From the very start of the Bible the story of God's covenant with humankind begins to be told. We hear of the *binding promises* God makes with Adam and with Noah. And over these past weeks of Lent we have been hearing of some of the other key aspects and the key characters in the unfolding story of God's covenant with Israel. We have heard of God's promises to Abraham. We have heard of God giving the Law through Moses. And we heard last week something of the great tragedy in Israel's *infidelity* to the covenant. The portion from Chronicles last Sunday encapsulated what is one of the powerful subthemes in the telling of the story of the covenant - Israel's *failure*; its neglect of their side of the bargain; its forgetfulness of the promises of God; its inability to commit to the covenant; its going after other gods. Ultimately, this results in the destruction of Jerusalem and in being carried off into exile. The failure to commit to the promises made with God had consequences.

Now, the portion we hear today from Jeremiah again places us in that context. Jeremiah is the prophet of the exile. He predicted its coming and he writes from Babylon in exile. What we hear today, though, is the only place in the entire Old Testament where there is a reference to a *'new covenant'* that will supersede the Covenant made in the past. In reflecting on their experience in Babylon the exiles ask the serious question, *has God finished with us now? Have we finally gone too far? Is this the end?* As it happened, it wasn't. The exile becomes a time of dynamic, creative and intellectual innovation. Many of the self-understandings and structures that Judaism carries with it into the future first takes shape not in Israel but in Babylon. And so, the exile does end; the people do return to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple and their common life.

Still, the early Christians saw in this portion from Jeremiah we hear today an expression of the *new* relationship between God and his people established in Jesus - the New Covenant. Jeremiah tells us that in the new Covenant God will *plant the law deep in their hearts*, that all will come to know the ways of the Lord; that they will have their iniquity forgiven. The gift of saving forgiveness won for us in Jesus, and that through Jesus we can know God personally, for ourselves, shows us the fruit of that New Covenant.

But this new covenant is sealed at great cost. Jeremiah tells us how God's law will be planted deep within us, written on our hearts. But as we approach holy week we know what the cost was. The gospel reading points us towards this: *unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain. But if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.* We hear today Jesus announce that the hour of his glory has come but this only through his death and resurrection. The grain of wheat can bear fruit only once it has been hidden in the darkness of the earth. It does not come easily, cheaply! God drawing us into personal and eternal communion with him – covenant with him – cost him the life of his Son. God shows us the depth, the extremes, of his commitment to us. What commitment will we give him?

My brothers and sisters, we are called to witness to the truth and power of commitment. In part, a bold and authentic Christian witness will see us commit to the life of a church. The trouble with so much modern church life, compounded in a city like Melbourne, is that one's attachment and commitment to a church can depend on your shopping list of likes and don't likes. One of the principal issues being that our commitment levels – in countless aspects of our lives – is dependent on our *feelings*. Imagine if Christ's commitment to the Cross was dependent on his feelings... Or the witness of the martyrs was dependent on their feelings. Often, we turn up when we feel like it, or nothing else has got in the way. So often our commitments depend on, 'what will I get out of this?' not realising perhaps that if we don't 'feel' as if we're getting much out of it might be because we're not giving much to it...

Church life – our life – can only endure and grow and be strengthened, if we are committed to each other; if we allow the seed planted in us to grow deep, allowing our roots and branches to entangle. A church can only grow and be strengthened if we understand that the relationship that we share is a

covenant relationship; if we are committed to support and help each other – personally and communally – through the tough times, the times of difficulty and suffering and not just the easy, joyous, fruitful times.

God sees commitment as serious business. Covenant living means being in there for the long haul come what may and not just for our personal peace and comfort; of sometimes burying our preferences and personal agendas. The life of faith tells us commitment will bears fruit, even if it is costly. God is true to his promises. The new covenant in Jesus is not just with God. But with each other as well. Amen.