

Sunday Thought

16th October 2022 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings

Jeremiah 31: 27 - 34
Psalm 119: 97 - 104
2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5
Luke 18: 1 - 8



Fresh Start – New Way

The time is coming! Those words at the beginning of this chapter from Jeremiah are full of hope *'We are going back. Things will change! Everything will be new!'* Most reassuring is God's word to the prophet, *'I appeared to you in exile from far away, but I always loved you.'* That has been a common experience of believers which *John of the Cross*, termed the dark night of the soul, when faith's light is dark-clouded and God seems a long, long way away. Like John, most have discovered it was in fact a time of stumbling closer to the Lord in the darkness. It is true we really appreciate people and things when we miss them, and it is the same with God.

Many of us feel like that too about the church. I hold close those encouraging words, *'the time is coming'*. The present moment gives us opportunity to draw closer to the Lord, learning how his love gets closer the more distant it feels! Now is a time to re-think our fellowship and our worshipping life as God's people. Ideas and many words are flying around. Dreams are being shared which fade in the morning light of reality. So many experiments at worship and mission fail to cross generation barriers. Worship competes with rapidly changing forms of entertainment. All the while visible numbers decrease – the general population dismiss the variety of 'gospel bait' we dangle over the turbulent stream of living.

Our reading from Jeremiah has a word from the Lord for this same situation. It is, in a single phrase – *'Inward religion steeped in the scriptures'*. He tells the exiles in Babylon, *God says 'I will restore my people.'* There will be national restoration and replanting of the land. People will feel *'I went to sleep and I woke up refreshed'*. *'I will restore my people'*, is God's message to them. *'BUT things are going to be different!'* There's going to be a new covenant agreement between us, based on my same laws but not in the way you have previously interpreted them and *'made them chains of worship and religion in the Temple prison'*. *I still love you and the new covenant will be a deep heart to heart relationship between us, based on my law of LOVE.* It is interesting to note how Jesus interpreted this. The ten commandments are three DO rules and seven DON'TS. Jesus uses the summary of Love God and Love neighbour, to which he added for his followers, *'love one another.'* *That's ALL 'DO'! Don'ts look after themselves in real love.*

A life full of God's love will determine the shape of my personal living, just as a church full of Christ-love will be shaped anew for his purposes, generation after generation. That was the promise Jesus made so real and possible by his words, his reconciling death, life-giving resurrection and love-filling gift of his Spirit. All for us in response to our love and faith. Jeremiah hears God again [29.13] *'If you seek me with all your heart, you **will** find me'* and know my plans.' A music teacher used to sing this line to me from Mendelssohn's Elijah. I didn't become a pianist but the verse is alive in my mind even now!

Working out the Law of Love in the church and individually requires much guidance. Paul, writing to Timothy, reminds him that the guidance comes from a mind and heart steeped in the scriptures. They are the source material for knowing God's way as Jesus taught and lived it. Knowing the scriptures is not a matter of memorising texts to be able to spike a church council resolution. It IS to live and speak from the heart - by love. We have the advantage over Timothy in that we are able to read over again the words of Jesus and especially his 'Living by Love Manifesto' [Matthew 5 to 7]. It describes the life of the 'happy people' and the 'Kingdom Way'. I recall a church fayre which I later considered remarkable. In the course of that busy morning an intelligent, unbelieving lady remarked to me, *'I have been reading Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and I believe the answer to all the world's problems - and mine - is in those words.'* Paul tells Timothy *'There will be people with itchy ears who want pleasing messages rather than the honest preaching and worship by which the Spirit convinces, reproaches and encourages the whole fellowship.'* I have noticed quite a few ear-scratchers of late! I should sit further forward!

The challenge for Timothy then, and for us now, is to learn, live and preach the message of Jesus' word, patiently, urgently and faithfully. The Lord's new times lie ahead. Whatever his timetable - we have to be ready. The Gospel for today adds to that challenge. It's another of Jesus' little stories of encouragement which is often misinterpreted. Some have seen it in childish terms of *'If I cry long enough and loud enough He's bound to listen.'* Jesus said, *God is **not** like that judge.* Continuing in prayer and knowing God's words is opportunity to get to know him better, to learn his way and to be ready for his New Things.

A prayer in praise of the Scriptures [based on Psalm 119]

Lord, I love your words
I often read them in the scriptures, and
sometimes meditate on them more deeply in quiet times.
Your words comfort, strengthen and guide me.
They help me make wise decisions about complicated
issues of daily life
Help me to read and follow your words of practical love.

Lord God, in Jesus you are my teacher.
I don't want to miss a day in your school
So much depends on what I read and learn there.

