

Introduction to the Fifth Sunday in Lent - 'Resurrection and Life'

With the Fifth Sunday of Lent, we draw closer to the dramatic horror of Holy Week. Like the people of devastated Judah to whom the great prophet Jeremiah spoke, so would the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth be devastated. Jeremiah gave a prophecy of hope: the coming of a new covenant relationship between God and God's people. God's law of righteous living would be carried within God's people, written on their hearts, to heal them, and restore their relationship with the faithful One. Each one of them would know God's love and will directly. The prophecy stands. Jesus brought yet more hope: the resurrection to eternal life. From Palm Sunday to Easter Day, we shall bring into the present the events which brought, not only God's law, but God's life-giving Spirit out into all the world.

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'Resurrection and Life'

by

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Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ps 119:9-16; Hebrews 5:5-14; John 12:20-33

Introduction

The prophet Jeremiah was writing in greatly troubled times. The young king of Judah, King Jeconiah, son of Jehoiakin, had been taken captive and into exile after the Babylonians invaded and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. The little kingdom of Judah was being ruled by Zedekiah, a puppet-king, proxy for the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. A priest in exile in Babylon, Shemaiah of Nehelam, issued a prophecy which Jeremiah, who still lived in Judah, challenged. The passage we heard this morning is part of Jeremiah's response to Shemaiah.

God would not be over and against them judging and condemning as they tried to cope with their loss and grief. Family members had been killed or taken captive to Babylon. The order, stability, and familiarity of their previous way of life gone. The Temple with its rites of worship, their leaders, even the rightful king, were no longer amongst them. Foreign invaders ruled. How could they live as the people in a covenant with the one, true God? Wouldn't it become too hard? Gradually they'd drift into the ways, spirituality, and religious practices of the Babylonians. Living in his devastated land with his traumatised people, Jeremiah proclaimed his prophecy of hope.

The people of Israel would have new life infused into their covenant with God. They would carry God's law inscribed on their hearts. Each individual person 'from the least to the greatest' would be enabled to live righteously as was God's will for them. For in loving kindness, God desired the healing of the people, that they should be whole and wholesome. But God's vision was much wider. God sees beyond our human horizons and it came time for the good news of God's great love for the Life God had created from nothing, and especially human life to be shared with other peoples all around the world. With Jesus of Nazareth, the time came.

John 12:20-33

The gospel passage we heard this morning, tells of what happened in the fall-out from Jesus raising Martha and Mary's brother, Lazarus, from the dead and calling him out of his tomb. 'Many of the Jews therefore, who had

come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him' (v. 45). Jesus' following grew to a size that was beginning to upset the balance of power in Judea and that posed a real threat to the little nation. The Roman rulers wouldn't hesitate to come down with iron fist on what they might perceive as a political uprising. And sure enough, the crowds of people who had come to Jerusalem for a festival heard that Jesus was coming and went to meet him, shouting 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!' 'Save! Please!' Save us from the Romans, blessed King of Israel coming in God's name. In response, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a young donkey, just as King David had done in all humility. The message conveyed to the people by such a prophetic act was powerful: the longed-for Messiah had come. If the Romans had understood it, they'd have seen it as dangerously provocative given the large numbers in the crowd. The Pharisees, responsible for worship in the synagogues, and chief priests, responsible for Temple worship, were afraid that the Romans would destroy both their holy place the Temple and Jerusalem, and the nation. They had already had a meeting of their Council to decide what to do about Jesus, and Caiaphas, the High priest, had argued that it was better for them to have one man, Jesus, to die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed. So, looking at the crowds shouting "Hosanna!", the Pharisees threw up their hands: "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!" The die was cast. The inevitable would happen. Aha! Enter the Greeks!

It's at this point in the Gospel of John that Jesus goes further than the prophet Jeremiah. Up to this time Jesus has been clear that his saving mission was to the lost sheep of Israel. Now, Greeks who had heard about him, came wishing to see Jesus. When Philip and his fellow disciple, Andrew, told Jesus, he recognised the Greeks arrival as a sign. The gospel of God's faithful, loving-kindness was for all people who believed in him and not only for Israel. Instead of saying, as he had a couple of times, my hour has not yet come, he said: "*The hour has come* for the Son of Man to be glorified." A sequence of events to which we shall be witnesses will begin next Sunday, Palm Sunday, through to Easter Day. Through his death, Jesus opened the covenant between God and the people of Israel to include those who were not *born* into it: The new covenant. People with faith in Jesus, who desired to be part of God's covenant, to belong and know God as Lord, Adonai Eloheinu, and as their Father, would be able to do so through spiritual re-birth. Jesus understood that how people all over the world would know of this good news was not going to happen by him living and teaching with a small band of disciples confined to Judea and Galilee. In spite of trouble brewing and all

the indications of coming to boiling point, Jesus escaping to another country was, for him, not an option. He would remain faithful and not betray God and his disciples who had faith in him. Yes, he would be lifted up on the cross, dying as does a grain of wheat, but just as the grain germinates, grows into a plant, and bears much fruit, so the good news of Jesus' healing love and saving death for the sins of the whole world would be proclaimed its length and breadth, and bear much fruit.

Conclusion

In our own times with countries in trouble, we are the bearers and custodians of the great truth that God and his cosmos are *for* life and humanity, and not against us. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life.'

