

St. Margaret's Uniting Church Mooroolbark

Sunday 18th March, 2018 – Lent 5 Baptisms of Eva Knezek and Noah & Nikolai Ormando

OLD TESTAMENT READING Jeremiah 31:31-34 *A New Covenant*

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,* says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

GOSPEL READING John 12:20-26 *Some Greeks Wish to See Jesus*

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURES

Have we squandered our inheritance in the faith?

I often hear of past glory days when Sunday schools were full to the rafters. There are remnant photos here of youth groups and better times. A church I spent time with recently once had 600 members and now they struggle to have 20 at worship any given Sunday. And with Billy Graham's recent passing, we are reminded of churches that once were filled in response to his moving messages.

What might it mean to squander our faithful inheritance? Sometimes I wonder if we thought things were once so good that people would keep finding our open doors and come in, eager for the good news of Jesus Christ? And what of that good news?

If I were to challenge you, could you get up at a moment's notice and say in a few words what God means to you?

I was challenged this way myself this week. Someone asked me, who is God? I had to stop and think. But perhaps I have an unfair advantage over most of you, because my waking and sleeping hours have been framed in the business of God for near on two decades now.

For the record, I understand the God I worship to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as proclaimed in the Scriptures. I also know God to be a God of Covenant, always reaching out to people like you and me, even when we don't realise this is true. The story today from Jeremiah is another example of this. I also believe that God is revealed to us most fully in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I wonder about the squandering of inheritance, because this is the background to this incident we hear from Jeremiah. The Hebrew people are in exile. Remember they once escaped Egypt and wandered 40 years until ready to enter the promised land given them by God. But now they are in Babylon, alienated from past promise, in a place where they feel they cannot live out the blessing of God. And they feel like they

have squandered their inheritance. They feel that the exile is God's judgement upon them. They feel guilty about losing their way ...

So hear then these words from the prophet Jeremiah:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

There was a time much earlier in my life when I was anxious about many things, and especially anxious about God's judgement upon me. The only path towards easing this anxiety seemed to be hard work. Read the bible, pray earnestly, repeat. Read, pray, repeat.

I wanted to know God's grace and love, but didn't seem to know the pathway. If only I could really 'know the Lord', as we hear from the words of Jeremiah.

Actually, this is what God promises. It is the voice of God speaking through the prophet to people feeling guilty, lost, in exile. *'You will know me, all of you, from the least to the greatest. For I will forgive your iniquity and remember your sin no more.'*

Does that take your breath away! It does to me, even now! Aren't we all in exile in some way? Don't we all hold guilt about the inglorious things we have done or failed to do in our lives? Don't we all wonder about what we have squandered when we look back and recognise that the gifts of God have been crazy in their generosity and abundance?

And to all of us, God says, 'I am making a new Covenant, a new agreement.' Because God does not want us to remain in places of exile, or feel abandoned from lands of promise. Our God is a reconciling God, as we find so deeply in the story of Jesus Christ.

The God of Covenant has continued to reach out to folk in exile, those who have lost their way. And we find the way most fully revealed in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

From the gospel reading, from John's gospel, we hear of the pending glory or fulfilment of God's great plan for humanity. Jesus speaks of a grain of wheat needing to die, or be buried in the ground in order for it to fulfil its purpose. That wheat then sprouts in abundance, mystery and gift – all from God.

In more anxious times I did read and pray, read and pray. And that is still true for all of us today. Although the story and promises of God remind us that we need not do it in order to cover our fears and anxieties. Rather we do it in order to embrace or know deep in our heart that God keeps reaching out in love towards us, towards Eva, Noah and Nikolai. God reaches out until we know within our hearts that here we find a place to belong, a place to be loved, a place of blessing that carries us on our way as the people of God.

What a blessing that is poured out on Eva, Noah and Nikolai. What a blessing that we as followers of Christ bear witness to these things and welcome them on this journey of discipleship!

Let's take a moment to breathe all of this in. Let us breathe in the very breath of God that gives us life. Let us breathe in awe of this God of the Covenant who writes life and grace and love deep within our hearts.