

**“Yours, and Mine” – Jer 31:31-34 – Lent 5 – Apr 2, 2006**

As I mentioned during the announcements it is really good to be back! One week of study leave is nothing like a vacation, and I did manage to make some progress – finished one assignment and almost finished another. I have to admit that I can create a million or more diversions while I am trying to write a paper – for example I rebuilt the interactive website, mostly because while tinkering I broke it!

I also had a chance to actually pause and look around the house, and was reminded of a number of projects that I have started some time ago, and have never finished, like the ceilings in the basement. I created one small hole at the bottom of the stairs when I added a light in the cold storage area under the front steps (had to run a cable). The damage is much more significant in the laundry room, where late one night (I think it was around Christmas or New Year's a few years ago) we noticed some water coming through the ceiling (which is, naturally, gyproc sheeting ... a TERRIBLE choice for a basement!). I bust open a large portion of the ceiling, and discovered that the copper water lines had rotted out. Fortunately the Home Depot on Station Avenue is (or at least was) open 24 hours, and so a quick run over there, followed by cutting and soldering late into the night, resulted in water in all the right places in the house, and none in the wrong places.

I did eventually attempt to replace more than the emergency fix I made that night, but it kind of stopped when I would up redoing the whole bathroom – you know how it goes, I replaced the taps, but while I was at it I replaced the sink, and while the sink was out I replace the floor, and so forth.

The point of all this is that I realized that Elizabeth is a very patient person. You see, it's been about ten years since I opened the first small hole in the basement ceiling, and she certainly could be excused for thinking that I had reneged on the promise I made to repair it properly. (I think this is going to be the summer of home repairs!)

The Israelites sitting by the rivers of Babylon in the Sixth Century B.C. must have had the same thoughts about the promises from God. After all, weren't they the inheritors of the covenant God made with Abraham, the predicted nations in the promised land? Weren't they the children of the children that Moses led out of Egypt, and to whom God promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience? What had they done wrong? How had they disobeyed so badly as to be rounded up by the invading troops and carted off to Camp Babylon? Life had been so good, so normal. God's favour had shined upon them – jobs were available, businesses prospered, children grew up, houses and farms were bought and sold, worship was conducted in the Temple. Life was good.

But now it was so different. Captives, prisoners, detainees held in bondage far from home. It was told by traders that the Temple was no more, torn down, desecrated. Jerusalem lay in ruins, foreigners occupied once-prosperous homes and villas that had been confiscated by the local authorities within minutes of the detainees being loaded into carts for the long trip to the strange interior.

Where was God in all of this? Did this mean that the covenants, so treasured and so vaunted by the rabbis, were no more? Had God gone back on His word, canceling those covenants and abandoning His people?

I'm sure we can imagine how those captives felt, because there are times when we feel somewhat the same way. Natural disasters, diseases that kill millions, economic oppression, political oppression, religious oppression, harsh regimes, suicide bombers, lying politicians, heartless churches, the list of ways in which it seems that God is no longer interested in people seems endless at times. Even in our personal lives there are times when we are moved to ask, where is God in all of this? Has He forgotten me, abandoned me?

And so it was to a whole nation of people grieving, forlorn, captive and exiled that God delivered His reassurance through the prophet Jeremiah. Not from a High Priest sitting in luxury at the Temple, not from a politician making a public and formal statement surrounded by the perks of office,

but from a prophet instructing the exiles to live normal lives, buying property, tilling the land. If we follow the sequence of events as written in the book we hear the message of promise of a new covenant issued even before Jerusalem fell, a signal that this promise was not a catch-up kind of recovery on God's part, an "oopsie" because things had gone terribly wrong, but that God was prepared to declare this new covenant with deliberation in advance of, perhaps in preparation for, the disastrous events to come.

Recall that Jeremiah is the prophet who bought the field of Anathoth. Shortly after receiving and delivering this promise of a new covenant Jeremiah, following instructions from God, purchased a farm field just as the invading army was arriving – a move that made no sense at all. When others were desperately trying to liquidate their assets in order to have cash to carry into exile, here's Jeremiah ostensibly throwing his money away, making what could have been considered the worst real estate deal of all time, buying land that was about to be seized by the enemy. His claim that "Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" seemed unreal, and yet would in the end provide vindication and proof that Jeremiah had indeed heard and communicated the word of God, was indeed a true prophet.

So to those people in exile came a promise of a new covenant, not like the previous covenant, the one given to and through Moses during the journey out of Egypt. What was to be different about this new covenant, what was to be unlike the old? Well, that old covenant, centered on the Ten Commandments, was a covenant of rules, of laws, of prescriptions of "do's" and proscriptions of "don'ts" fleshed out in volumes of rites and observances. Filled with blessings and curses that previous covenant was a dangerous minefield for the faithful, with almost countless ways to fail in perfect obedience. It is no wonder that even God commented that the previous covenant was one "that they broke."

That this covenant was initiated by God was nothing new – all the previous covenants were as well. That the people would know God intimately was also nothing new. Even that God would forgive sins was a feature of previous covenants declared by God. But now instead of focusing on past failures here is the promise of a future filled with hope is a new and different definition of the relationship between God and His people, with the law written not on cold tablets of stone but written on the heart. The newness is a special gift, the capacity to be faithful and obedient. In the Old Testament the heart is the seat of the will, the determination, the driving force of life. Here, the gift of the law written on the heart implies the will to be faithful now comes from within instead of being imposed from outside forces. God is promising to change people from the inside out, centering them in their faith.

Of course, we who are New Testament people cannot read the Old Testament except through the filters of our own faith, and we proclaim that this promise of the new covenant was fulfilled in Christ Jesus, that through Jesus the words of God's new law are written on our hearts. Those words of love, faith and loving faith are indelibly inscribed upon our hearts as promised: "I am yours, and you are mine," says the Lord. In a new covenant established in the death and resurrection of Jesus we are claimed for all time in a relationship that nothing can destroy or wither.

And so the answer to the question "where is God in all of this?" comes clearer – God is with us, in our hearts, at the very centre of our being. The question then shifts perhaps to "where are we in all of this?" and the answer is also clear: we are not adrift, we are not abandoned, we are neither ignored by God nor rejected by God. True to His word, sealed in the blood of Christ, "I am yours, and you are mine."