

**The days are coming.** (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Recently in church we've had readings related to the Babylonian Exile – two weeks ago we had Lamentations 1 and Psalm 137, which were about the lamenting of the people in exile – Jerusalem was empty, and the people sat down by the rivers of Babylon and they wept. They despaired for their situation. They'd lost their homes, they'd lost their homeland, and they'd lost hope.

Then last week we heard from Jeremiah 29, in the letter that the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon – encouraging them not to give up, but instead to engage with life in Babylon. God, through the prophet, urged the people to “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity...” (Jer 29:5-7a)

This week, as we conclude our series on the exiles in Babylon, we come this time to a message of hope.

‘The days are coming...’

And that phrase, “the days are coming,” is repeated several times in the book of Jeremiah, where God, through Jeremiah, assures his people of what will happen. Not what might happen, but what will happen.

In chapter 23 we have, “‘The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.’ (23:5)

In chapter 30 ‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will bring my people [...] back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their ancestors to possess,’ says the Lord.’ (30:3)

Earlier in this chapter “‘The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will plant the kingdoms of Israel and Judah with the offspring of people and of animals. Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,” declares the Lord.’ (31:27-28)

And the promises continue from today's reading into chapter 33, “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. “‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land.’ (33:14-15)

Throughout the book of Jeremiah, we see God expressing his frustration and disappointment with his people because they have wandered away from the covenant relationship that had existed between them since in the time of Moses. God's warnings to the people had become reality. Babylon had invaded, the temple had been destroyed, and the survivors were taken into exile.

But Jeremiah also shares tremendous hope: hope for the future, hope that the people might not have been able to pin down to a specific date, but hope that was sure and certain: “The days are coming!”

Our reading today, is part of that hope Jeremiah shared. It tells us about comfort for the people of Israel, and comfort for us – because what was promised to the people all those years ago, and which was fulfilled in Jesus, is there for us today.

‘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’ (31:31).

Jeremiah is the only Old Testament prophet to use the term “New Covenant” – we know it well because it is used many times in the New Testament - At the last supper, Jesus said “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). Paul uses it in his letters to the Corinthians, and it is used several times in the letter to the Hebrews.

Sometimes in the Old Testament, the prophets refer to a coming “Everlasting Covenant” (Isaiah 55:3, 61:8, Jeremiah 32:40, 50:5; Ezekiel 16:60), which speaks to a renewal of the existing covenant between God and his people - the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

But here, Jeremiah, talks of a new covenant. A new covenant that is surely coming for the people.

We, today, know the story of the fulfilment of God’s plan in Jesus. The righteous Branch from David’s line that Jeremiah prophesied. The Old Testament looks forward to Jesus’ arrival in history, we know that it prophesies his life and death and resurrection, and we know that those prophesies are confirmed in Jesus... but when we read the Old Testament we need to remember the original hearers – or indeed the writers – didn’t have that confirmation. In the context of today’s Old Testament reading, Jeremiah and his audience didn’t know what we know.

Jeremiah lived and prophesied around 600 years before Jesus. From the reign of Josiah, king of Judah, until after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple.

He was called when he was only a boy, he was called at a time when the country was in serious trouble. His career spans a time of incredible catastrophe for the people of Judah. Jeremiah was called to speak while the Babylonians were invading Judah, burning Jerusalem, and carrying vast numbers of Jewish people into exile. Jeremiah was then one of a small remnant left in Judah, living in the midst of the rubble. The people who had been promised God’s protection and deliverance were in a place of desolation.

The people had been torn from the land. The Promised Land. The land poetically described as flowing with milk and honey. The very land that God had given them.

And Jeremiah was called to prophesy to Judah through a time of lament, through weeping and mourning, and to repentance. And in the midst of all the sadness, he

revealed hope and promise for God's people. That even though the circumstances were terrible and everything seemed hopeless, Jeremiah and other prophets of the time proclaimed that God's people could still rejoice and praise God for his promises, even though the people had broken the covenant. They assured the people that God would not remain angry, that God would be faithful to his people, and would restore them (see e.g. Lam. 3:19-26, Hab. 3:16-19). They told the people that from death would rise new life, and also a new way of relating to God.

Jeremiah was given a proclamation to make, that God would initiate a new covenant with his people. His people had violated their existing covenant - they had bowed to Baal and Asthoreth, to Molech and other gods.

But even though the people hadn't been faithful to God, God was faithful to the people. Of course, there was a consequence to the people turning away from God: They were invaded and exiled and taken to the brink of destruction. But even as those things were happening, God spoke through the prophets, and spoke of mercy and compassion, redemption and restoration.

God would not leave his people in the dark place they were in, but would open the way to reconciliation, and would ultimately redeem people, and begin a new – or renewed – relationship with his people.

And so, as we've heard this morning, Jeremiah reveals what this new relationship – this new relationship between God and his people – will be like.

“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.” The ‘law’ here isn't just a set of legal requirements. It's not simply the ten commandments. To the Jewish people, the law – the Torah – is the first five books of the Old Testament. Not all of that is commandments – most of it is simply the story of God and his people – in particular the story of Israel. So this promise of having God's Torah within them and on their hearts and minds isn't about them learning the right thing to do and memorizing and obeying rules, instead, it's about knowing God and knowing God's promises and plans.

Jeremiah tells us what God promises: “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” The New Covenant is not a one way thing: We, together, are God's people. We are bound to one another. While we each have to make our own decision to follow Jesus, once we do that, we are not just individuals who follow Jesus, but we become part of something bigger than ourselves. God's people. Or, as Paul later puts it in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:12-13), the body of Christ.

We follow Jesus, together. We take up our crosses and walk together. Each of us has different gifts and uses them in different ways, but we work together. Being a Christian means being part of Christ's body, one piece of a larger whole.

Jeremiah goes on to say that God tells us “they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” Those who have been going to church for a long time often take this for granted, or miss the significance of it. We get used to the words and the prayers and the

declarations. Yes, we know God is revealed to us in Jesus, and yes, we can have a personal relationship with Jesus.

But that is a profound idea. Take a moment to ponder it: God, the creator of all things, is knowable to you. God isn't this cosmic idea that we might be able to glimpse or contemplate if we do the right things, or make the right offerings or say the right words, or fast or meditate in the correct way.

Instead: we can know God. The greatest of us. The least of us. We can all know God.

God isn't unapproachable. Instead, God, in Jesus, chose to approach us! To enter into our world to make himself known to us.

For Abraham to know God and Moses to converse with God was completely different to what happened in the nations around them with their different gods and different faiths.

In other societies the idea was generally that you had to appease the gods. You wouldn't become a friend of Baal or Asthoreth or Molech or any other 'gods' that they had. You couldn't know them. You might know about them, and you would do everything you could not to incur their wrath or earn their favour. But you would never enter into something that would be regarded as a 'relationship' with those gods.

But we get to know God. Not just know things about God. But have a relationship with God as we would have a relationship with each other.

The days are coming, says the Lord. Whatever hard times we face will pass, just as the exile passed for the ancient people of God. The days are coming, and God will put all things right.... But we don't know when.

'When?' is such an important question for people. For us. We have this desire to know when things will happen. How long until? Can I get this done before that happens? And so often in our lives we don't know when, and we have to live with the uncertainty. Patience is part of the fruit of the Spirit, of course, but so often we find ourselves lacking.

We would like to know when, but we don't. But the days are surely coming.

While we do not always know God's timing, we can – and do – know God's faithfulness. If God says it will happen, it will happen. And we have this wonderful assurance throughout the scriptures as we see what God has promised, happening.

The challenge for us is to realise that the new covenant is not somewhere off in the future, as it was for the people of Jeremiah's time, but has been delivered for us in Jesus. And having realised that, to embrace that covenant, to be part of that relationship with God.

We need to let God put his law within us, let him write it on our hearts – not simply to remember and follow God's commandments, not simply to be good people, but to build our own relationship with God and with each other. To live as God's people.

And it doesn't matter what we can do, or what we have done, whether good or bad, because, in Jesus, we have the assurance that Jeremiah shared with the people of his time "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."

Amen