

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 25 MARCH 2012

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Psalm 51; John 12: 20-33

“A Heart from Sin Set Free”

"Create a clean heart in me O Lord, a heart from sin set free."

Somehow it was these words that travelled with me this week more than any others from the readings.

What exactly do I imagine a clean heart to be, I wondered. And what would it mean to have a heart that is “from sin set free”.

Traditionally for me, I would imagine a heart without blemish, without anything untoward in it, pure, healthy, whole, at peace. Nothing to forgive or in need of forgiveness in it. No bad thoughts, no weaknesses impinging on a moral and ethically perfect way of being in the world.

I’ve long since discovered that that is absolutely impossible for me to live up to. I may be forgiven every time I confess my sins, I may believe it only takes repentance from me to get back into God’s good books. I may ask other’s forgiveness and receive it. I may forgive others for their part in what hurts me.

But even where I may be alright with others, even where I may believe God’s forgiven me whatever there is to forgive, it often remains impossible to forgive myself, or permanently detach myself from whatever it is I need my heart and soul to get detached from in order for me to totally be “clean and from sin set free”. By the time you are my age too much has stuck and left its mark somehow for you to ever completely “be clean and from sin set free”

I don’t know about you, and most of you are a bit older than me, so you would know far better than me how this works, but over the years it seems only more and more is stuck to my heart and soul that is not in accordance with a clean heart or from being “from sin set free”.

It’s not only that I have made mistakes I find very difficult to forgive myself for, even years after they happened. It’s not only that I’ve experienced pain and hurt inflicted by others that is taking forever to heal and is difficult to forgive or forget.

It is more those other, more insidious and less tangible aspects of life that seem to make it impossible to get even close to experiencing myself in that way. I was brought up with the concept of original sin, and over the years has been making more and more sense to me, even where it is not very popular in our present Church culture.

We are born into a world that is a long way away from being clean, or from sin set free, and we are part of that world, even from before our conception. The sins of our families, our tribes, our countries, our race, our history, they all cling to us and co-determine who we are and what we become no matter how hard we try to escape from them.

The world we live in, the life we are part of, is one interrelated, interconnected sticky mess of joy

and pain, triumph and failure, life, love and suffering. And nobody escapes the complexity of that, it sticks to us, heart and soul.

On Wednesday night Professor Sean Winter at our lenten studies defined sin as “that which separates us from God”. Well, there is a lot it seems, in this world and in our lives, that endeavors, in one way or another to separate us from God.

Not only the mistakes we make, but also, on much larger scale, the many things that surround us in this world come between us and God. And there is nothing much we can do to change that, especially when we look at it on a larger scale than just our individual lives, with its quirks and weaknesses.

Sin is far more than trying to do the right thing, occasionally failing, asking forgiveness, getting it, and moving on. It is far more insidious than that, and affects things on a much larger scale than that.

There was another thing Professor Winter said on Wednesday that stayed with me: “It is not about us, it is about God”. Words I see reflected in the words of Jeremiah: “I will make a new covenant with you, and I will write my law upon your hearts”.

Jeremiah sees God breaking into that whole sticky mess of life, of a whole people taken into exile because they couldn’t live up to their part of the covenant and saying: “Ok, I’ve seen you drown, I’ve seen your inability to rise above what threatens our relationship and our covenant, so I’ll make a new covenant, come to a new understanding with you: I will do all the work.”

The life with God to be innate, written into our fabric, so we don’t even have to teach or learn it, but will practice it without thought. So it will come to us from the inside, naturally, breathed into us by God’s Spirit.

What Jeremiah witnesses to is God’s dedication to us, to our world, no matter what we do, or don’t do. God’s dedication to removing what separates from our hearts, from our souls, from the whole world, at his cost, from God’s side without expecting anything from us.

I think we may see a glimmer here of something that later will grow into the gospel about Jesus. That somehow, in him, that commitment, that dedication was seen to have moved another step further towards the removal of what worms its way in between God and us.

Jesus comes, lives in this world. He is part of its sinfulness, its complex interrelated, interconnected mess. It impinges on him. On what he is, on what he does, on how he is understood, on where his life’s journey ends.

With him the whole history of God’s people somehow comes under review, their culture, their law, their way of life. In him the present state of humanity comes under review as well, and found to be lacking. Around him the future of the Kingdom he preaches seems to come to a premature end.

He encounters hurt, pain, sinfulness in every shape and form, he walks into the brick walls of tradition and power, of religion and politics, of family relationships and the fragility of friendship and human commitment. His dreams are shattered, his visions disempowered. He laughs, he cries, he is angry, he is sad, and somehow, in it all, is what the gospel testifies, he keeps a clean heart. And through him, somehow, the whole world is from sin set free. How is that possible?

Is it because he never did anything wrong? Even if he didn’t, and I doubt it, because Jesus was

human. And as humans, even if we don't intend wrong, the brokenness of our humanity means it is impossible to stay detached from the hurting and pain that goes on around us. Being human he would not have been able to escape that larger complex of the whirlpool of God separating activity that is inextricably linked with our existence.

Jesus was very much part of life as we know it, and even the short paragraph we read today testifies to this. He has just entered Jerusalem in an atmosphere of confusion, questions, conflict and contradiction. "Who is this man?" Ask the Greeks who have (presumably) just arrived to celebrate pesach.

The question travels up the already forming hierarchy of Jesus' disciples and comes back with a story and an answer neither understands. Not his disciples and not the Greeks who have come to ask them what it all means.

Jesus is frustrated, tries to explain, comes up with a story of a seed, seems to be looking for a way to communicate what he is on about, without succeeding. Only much later will they get it, and even then they don't, as most of us, if we are honest, still don't.

And in that whole complex of back and forth, of intertwining and interacting processes of humanity around and, I suspect, inside him, this parable finds its way into the conversation: Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth.....

Some think that Jesus in these words comes to an understanding of himself that he had not had up till then. That these words mark a sea change in his understanding of himself and for that reason made an impression and were remembered, ending up at the core of the Christian Easter message as it was proclaimed before any of the written sources we have even took shape.

The understanding that he wasn't the messenger, but that he was the message. That it was his life (and death) that counted, and not his words, or even his actions that would change the world. However that may be, somehow, in these words, a deep and profound truth surfaces.

A radical change is needed. A life and death change. Nothing less will do. The world is drowning in separation from God. The mess is impossible to clean up because it is so complex and insidiously omnipresent. It kills what is of God where it can. Even if God's self rides into the fray, it will not recognise him, but stick to what it knows, what it is attached to, what constitutes its life.

"Create a clean heart in me, a heart from sin set free", is a prayer for God to come into that reality and get to work. Is indicating a preparedness from our side for God to break the power of separation and liberate our life, our world from all the god-awful mess that surrounds and determines our lives.

It is in the words of Jeremiah and the story Jesus tells however we are made to realise it is not our preparedness that is of importance though. This is not about us. It is about God.

About realising that we have a God who is determined to work his way into our hearts, into our world, to overcome the separation, to clean us up. That we have a God who wants to win our heart, our world and engrave a better way of life on it. That God is working on this, with all God's might and love. A might and love more powerful than that of the greatest and most powerful disempowerer we know: death.

Perhaps this is how we understand the raising of Christ. That Jesus died, his words unheeded and misunderstood, his actions voided and trivialised, his life rubbished and sacrificed to what some felt

to be the higher cause of the continuity of tradition and peace, but that what was of God in his life proved impossible to scrub off.

To live our lives knowing that whatever it is that is of God in our lives will prove impossible to be suppressed or blotted out. That what is of God in our life, our Church, our community, will stain the pavement of life where we have dropped, like the seeds of Frank's pomegranates, witnessing to the lives we led and the presence of God in them, no matter how infected and affected they were with the brokenness of this world.

What needs to die then is our sense of importance. Our sense that it all somehow depends on us. It doesn't. What the scriptures tell us is that God has taken it on. And all we have to do is to live a life of grateful thanks praising God's commitment to us with every breath we take and every song we can manage.

A clean heart, a heart from sin set free. With our eyes on the cross we are invited to allow ourselves a glimmer of what God is working on. Not only for us, but for the world.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God says Paul in his letter to the Romans, the life and death of Jesus Christ says that it goes even further than that: the love of God has overcome that separation and is growing and feeding the world like grain that keeps transforming what seems dead into new life.

Christ lives, his life fell like seed and stained the world with the divine reality of God's commitment and connectedness. And from this seed new life grew, and keeps growing, infecting and affecting the world with love, until nothing else will remain. Amen