

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, commonly called Passion Sunday

29th March 2020 at Saint John's Church in Savannah

See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant. JEREMIAH 1:10

Today is the Fifth Sunday in the Church's Lent, Passion Sunday - but this year God has taken charge, and imposed on us a Lent of his own choosing. We don't know whether this Lent of God's own choosing will be long or short - but we know that if we submit ourselves to it, it will turn to our benefit. In his own time, he will deliver us from this scourge, and bring us to an Easter of his own choosing, a joyful Easter to come. And that's really what today's lessons are about - it's about the hope that awaits us on the far side of judgment - and how even now as this judgment unfolds we may embrace that hope.

Judgement and hope was the message that God charged Jeremiah to bring to Jerusalem and Judea, in the last days of the kingdom:

See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.

There are six verbs in this message - in a concentric arrangement (like an onion). At the outer layer of the onion is *rooting out* and *planting* - metaphors from farming; inside that layer is *pulling down*, and *building* - metaphors from construction; at the core is *destroying* and *overthrowing* - metaphors of armed force. The first four of those verbs speak to the total destruction of the nation - its farms, its towns and cities, its defences, all that sustains it as a community- *uprooted, pulled down, destroyed, overthrown*. The cumulative impact of those four verbs of destruction is great: and yet, on the far side, there are two sayings of hope - of *building*, and of *planting*. A promise of the nation's return from exile, of restoration and renewal. Judgment must come - and yet on the far side of judgment there is hope. That's the message of Jeremiah.

As the opening verses indicate (1:1-3), Jeremiah's ministry took place at a time when the power of Babylon was on the rise throughout the Middle East, in the time leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, and the exile of the Jews to Babylon (v.3). In the rise of Babylon Jeremiah sees more than just military and political factors at work. He sees the power of God, bringing judgment on the nations, for their idolatry; and on his own people, for breaking the covenant. [As he tells Jeremiah, later in the first chapter, as he tells Jeremiah - they have *forsaken me, burned incense to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands* 1:16.] The calamity that is destroying Judah as a community is grounded in the breakdown of its community with God, its breaking of the covenant that God had given them; their disregard of their obligations under the covenant law to God and to neighbor. If the calamity that is happening to his community is judgment on its covenant breaking; the hope of its restoration is centered on the promise of *a new covenant* (Jeremiah 31:31-34), a promise of sins forgiven, of God's law written in their hearts, Israel delivered from the guilt and power of sin into a new fellowship with God, in a fellowship of love and obedience.

The witness of Jeremiah suggests that we might look at the crisis overcoming our own country, and the nations of the world, in a similar perspective. It is putting pressure on almost all forms of community - economic, cultural, and religious. And that's hard on everyone - but especially it is

hard on the vulnerable people who are being pushed into isolation; and it is hard on the people in abusive relationships who are being pushed into closer intimacy. Because the judgment affects all forms of community, maybe it's God's way of telling us it is time for us to examine the quality of our community with one another, and with him. Maybe this is a time for us to consider what forms of community God is rooting up and pulling down – and what he may be building and planting in their place.

Jeremiah's theme of judgment and hope, of covenant and community broken and made new is taken up in the New Testament lessons for this Sunday. The gospel lesson (John 8:46-end) shows us a human community, God's own people, incapable of receiving God's life-giving word, or the one who brings it. They cannot refute his claims to be the sinless Son of God – and yet they cannot bear them – and so they demonize, reject, and attempt to lynch him. This reaction is extreme – but it exposes the nature of sin that is at work in us. It makes us incapable of hearing God's word and receiving life from him – and it exposes our claims to fellowship and community with him as a sham, if we are not hearing his word. And if we think such perversity is a distant possibility, let's just wait and see what happens if social morale begins to buckle under the pressure of an extended crisis. We might discover that our good intentions, our technology, our pride in ourselves, are a veneer over a community that is contemptuous of its obligations towards God and neighbor.

What the gospel lesson's "bad news" makes clear, is that the hope that we can embrace, is not a hope in ourselves, or in human wisdom and power. It is a hope in the sinless Son of God, the rejected one - who takes upon himself the consequence of our sin, and suffers judgment on our behalf. As man, he is able to suffer; as a sinless man, his suffering can atone for sin; as infinite God, the great I AM, his suffering atones for the sins of the whole world. In the furious attempt to lynch him, his own death on the cross is foreshadowed, and in his departure from the Temple, there is an ominous note of judgment. But in the Epistle lesson, on the far side of that death, the one who left the earthly temple now enters the heavenly tabernacle, the most holy presence of God. He enters as the High Priest who has by his death offered the sacrifice that has the power to cleanse our consciences from dead works to serve the living God, the sacrifice that seals the new covenant foretold by Jeremiah. To believe in him, is to be brought into the new covenant community he established by the sacrifice he offered for us – a community of sinful men with a most holy God.

If we have entered into this new community by faith in him, then it is our part to repent of what today's Epistle lesson calls *dead works* (Hebrews 9:14)– the false gods of technology, career, politics, food, virtue-signalling which are the American religion of today, and in their place we must put a new obedience, in what the same Epistle lesson calls the *service of the living God*, with a new attention to our covenant-relationships with God and neighbor. In the gospel lesson, Jesus says, *he that is of God hears God's words* – and those who *hear them not, are not of God*. So are we really listening to the word of God? Are we investing in relationship with him, in the work of prayer? Now is the time to put down the smart-phone, pick up the Bible, the Prayer Book, and put them to work in deepening your relationship with God.

That's essential to our community with God – but what of our community with our neighbours? At a time when social distancing moves us to social isolation, we should be reaching out – to our neighbours, our fellow-parishioners, and especially those isolated or vulnerable. One of the good things that is happening in our congregation in response to this crisis are the parishioners who have

signed up for the **Hi-Five ministry** [see the Friday St. John's Church Email "Join us live, online this Sunday, March 29 (Lent 5)"]. They are taking upon themselves the discipline of reaching out (by phone call or text) to five parishioners each week, to check in on them, to hear what they are experiencing – and already this is bearing fruit, in supporting parishioners in anxiety and grief. We use the internet so often to escape from real community – now in a time of isolation let's make a point of using it to build community. In its own small way, it is putting our faith into action, bearing witness by our works to the community with God and neighbor we have in Christ by faith in him.

Now is a time of judgment – as our communities are *rooted up* and *pulled down* — but now also is a time for us to embrace the hope set before us in the gospel – the community that God is *building* and *planting* in the new covenant established by sacrifice made by Christ for us, in his passion, suffering and death. For this is God's own Lent – and he is bringing us to God's own Easter.