

## Sermon for Passion Sunday 2021

### Jeremiah 31.31–34

31 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. <sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>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. <sup>34</sup>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.

### John 12.20–33

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. <sup>21</sup>They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ <sup>22</sup>Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup>Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup>Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

Since the first lockdown began in March 2020, I have taken 20 funeral services – all of them under some degree of restriction. The number of people was limited in every case – sometimes by law and sometimes by the safety capacity of the venue. Some services had to be at the graveside, or in a highly controlled environment at the crematorium. Technology has helped, of course, and the streaming of services from crematoria and churches has now become possible. Sometimes I have needed to remember in my introduction that people may be watching from far away – for example, I recently led a funeral service that was watched by family members in Mexico

If bereavement weren’t a strange enough experience to go through at the best of times, most funerals were planned by phone call, rather than a personal visit. Many people were not able to attend – either due to numbers, restrictions on travel, or for their own safety.

At the funeral there could be no singing (there still can’t), no comforting embraces – except for those in households or ‘bubbles’, and there could be no time afterwards for families and friends to gather, to share feelings, stories, food and maybe a drink. After distanced conversations at the door, people just disperse to their homes.

We may not be aware that we have expectations as to how we will grieve when the time comes, but this strange period has revealed that, in fact, we have.

Many of us will have lost a loved one during this pandemic – either from covid or from other causes – but we share in common is that in some sense our processing of loss and grief will be on hold until we can properly connect with others who have shared that loss with us.

So this strange time has also probably posed all kinds of questions as to what our faith really means in the midst of the loss, isolation, hopelessness and fear that so many people have

experienced. What does it mean to be a Christian during a pandemic, and what strength can we draw from the resources of our belief?

Our first reading was from the prophet Jeremiah. He lived in turbulent times, having to deliver his messages of challenge and judgment to a corrupt kingdom that would soon collapse under the onslaught of the Babylonian empire. It was a time of crisis and fear; all the norms of life that had been known would be overthrown – Jerusalem and its Temple would be destroyed, and all the community leaders would be deported from their homeland. The new normal for many would be exile, leaving a remnant behind to be subsistence farmers in a land ruled by invaders

During all this turmoil, Jeremiah sets out a vision of a new kind of relationship between God and his people. A relationship that didn't depend on written laws or a temple built of stone, but a relationship of the heart. A relationship equally available to all, regardless of status, and which would have the hallmark of mercy and forgiveness. All the fixed reference points for the people of Israel would be removed in exile, but no material destruction, no invader, no deportation can take this away, because it's inside. It will be written in their hearts,

Perhaps there is something there for us – in church and in wider society. Life has changed, and will probably never go back to just like it used to be. But we need to have faith that whatever changes in our material circumstances, God does not abandon us. That living relationship, that new covenant is there whatever the world throws at us. His love will not abandon us; it will hold us in the chaos and change.

And as we see in Jesus, it is a new covenant that refuses to be afraid of even death itself. Jesus refers to his crucifixion as 'being glorified', and compares it to a seed falling into the soil. Looking at a seed it is hard to imagine the living thing it will grow into; so it is when someone dies, says Jesus. The life that lies ahead is beyond our capacity to imagine.

That's why he uses an extreme comparison in the next sentence – love and hate are strong words. But it's a way of speaking from the culture of the day. You use extremes to illustrate the point. Jesus is saying that a life completely focused on this material world ultimately loses everything it has valued, whereas a life that knows and trusts in another dimension of life, trusts in what lies ahead, and keeps material things in the right priority and perspective understands and can embrace his message and good news. It's not about despising everything in this life, but about not being obsessed with it, not seeing it as the ultimate reality.

So, when death and loss and grief come, this message doesn't magic them away, nor does it bring our loved ones back. Coming to terms with a bereavement is a long road, and anything we do today or on Tuesday might be one small step.

But it does give us a reassurance that all that is truly important in a life has not been lost. We may think about the gifts, love, time, example, and relationship we had with someone – the things that have no financial value but are so precious. But we can also trust that whilst we cannot comprehend life to come, the promise is of a flourishing and fulfilment that goes beyond anything we have yet known, experienced or understood.

*Gracious Father, you gave up your Son out of love for the world: lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion, that we may know eternal peace through the shedding of our Saviour's blood, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*