

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

20th November 2016

Jeremiah 31:31-36

Spirit... truth-shaper... reshape us all... towards the truth... and refashion us... in the likeness of justice... Come and reimagine us into who we shall be... Amen

The Oxford English Dictionary... has chosen its word of the year and it is 'Post-Truth'... It has come out of Brexit and Trumpism... and it denotes circumstances in which objective facts... are less influential in shaping public opinion... than appeals to emotion and personal belief... In other words... if you want to win... claim emotion over truth...

This morning... let me tell you a post truth story... but the more moral biblical version of that... which quite literally comes from the heart... where belief shapes the future... rather than the actual reality on the ground...

And it is the story of Jeremiah... the unluckiest of prophets... who spent his whole prophetic career prophesying... and no one listened... or at least they didn't... hear... what Jeremiah was saying...

Jerusalem... wasn't exactly your top holiday destination at the time... It wasn't like today... white buildings... cobbled streets... and all roads led to the temple...

That's not the Jerusalem Jeremiah knew... When Jeremiah moved through the streets... he would have to wind his way through buildings where the roof had fallen in... step through broken walls... and over piles of rubble...

He would know a Jerusalem... where stray dogs barked in the streets... where fields had been burned... and where that holy of holy buildings... the temple... was in ruins...

You see the Babylonians... had invaded... usurping and enslaving the king and dignitaries... and pillaging Jerusalem... that city that thought itself indestructible... after all it was the seat of God's holy temple... of course it was indestructible... only no one had told the Babylonians... and now it lay in ruins...

This was a major blow... not just psychologically... but theologically too... The God who had led the Hebrews out of Egypt... who had wandered with them in the wilderness... brought water from rock... and mana in the desert... had been destroyed by a gentile race 1000 miles east of Judah...

Jerusalem was laid waste... and Jerusalem's temple... God's holy of holies... God's very house... the symbol of God's presence with the nation... was no more... What do you do when what you thought indestructible... is destroyed... and your God is not the power you expected...

The Babylonians left... leaving behind a puppet king... Jehoiakim... and a broken people...

Up to and throughout all this... Jeremiah prophecies... predicting all this unless folk didn't change their ways... No wonder he wasn't popular... and no wonder no one listened... He was just annoying and his career is littered with imprisonment... he was the butt of jokes... he ended up in the town stocks... He wasn't ever the best Saturday night entertainment...

People gave up on the covenant God had created with the Hebrews... The truth on the ground was the Babylonians has invaded... and the ever present defender of Israel... clearly was dead... and so was the spirit of the people...

Yet still Jeremiah spoke the word of then Lord... but in a post-truth way...

For God's saw people had to look past the reality in the ground... God found no one trusted the external representations of the faith... temples and arks and commandments... They were seen to be fallible...

So God spoke again... but not say anything new... The thing about post-truth is not what you say but what you want people to believe... so God kept the original line of all the old covenants... of God's presence and love... but what was new was where God wrote this covenant... in order to win the hearts of the people...

No longer tablets of stone... or grand institutions of Monarchy... the solid walls of temples... all now in ruins...

This time... God wrote the covenant on people's hearts...

Now this is a powerful thing... as Brexiteers and Trump supporters know... The covenant was internalised... they knew the promise of God in their hearts... and not in the institutions... It wasn't about reality around them... it was about belief within them...

Think about Jeremiah's town... it was a shadow of its former self... and not only that... ten years after the first invasion... the Babylonians were back... taking the last of the people back to Babylon and a 70 year exile... leaving only rubble... weeds... drifters and opportunists to take up residence... in the echo of one of the greatest nations of the time...

This was God's own city... but everything they believed about God... was now in ruins...

The Hebrews arrived in Babylon with nothing... not even their belief... The house of God was destroyed... everything had gone... and if you reflect too long on that... you get to the stage of believing none of it had ever been real...

But remember Jeremiah's words... his prophecy... I will write my covenant on your hearts... I will always be with you...

God was no longer to be found in the temple... God lived within the people... Rabbi Sacks says... covenant is a way of organising society... It is a relationship through which you grow a community... a relationship that shapes the values and rules a community lives by...

Now... when you are in a foreign land... as the Hebrews were... you aren't able to take much with you... there are no temples to show the presence and power of God...

What you realise when you are in exile... God is present within the heart of the people... the community... and no matter where you found yourself... be it 1000 miles from where you *thought* God was... God is here...

And this new insight for the Hebrews... had a massive psychological affect on them... When you are in exile... when God was no longer found in the institutions you recog-

nised... you could do one of two things... you could let God go... or you could let God grow...

The Hebrews chose the latter... They let God grow... in their hearts... and they rediscovered the covenant... It was here... in this post-truth era... when the temple was destroyed... and they had to relearn their beliefs for a new era... rewrite their stories... and so they did... and what we hold in our hands... and today call the Bible... this was what was essentially written while the Hebrews were in exile... These are the stories that gave them faith and meaning after they discovered God was in their hearts and not the institutions... These are the stories that let God grow...

And when they returned home... 70 years later... things were different... and celebrated God beyond temple and institution... God was everywhere...

And there is the truth... the post-truth story to tell today... The objective fact is that the temple is no more... the institutions are not where we find God... God is in the hearts and belief of us all... God is everywhere...

Jeremiah... has perhaps given us one of the greatest insights for our time in all the Old Testament... that God... that love... that the rules that can shape a decent... just society... are no further... than our own hearts...

What have we done to ourselves... and the way we make community... that makes it so difficult to find that core truth... Today perhaps we are in a post-truth era... where like the Hebrews... sees all the institutions that gave us meaning... and all the truths we once believed about ourselves... are being unexpectedly swept aside... and who we once thought we were is changing beyond our comfort zone... but the covenantal truth... that defines us and is to shape who we will be... is found right there written on our hearts...

And in a post-truth era... that is the power of our story... to hear it anew for our time...

Because change happens... as our long-serving elders can tell us... and but they can also tell us... what defines us... is not out there... The way of living into a future shaped through the love and grace of God... is not found in cold institutions... but what is alive and believed... in our hearts...