Jeremiah 31:7-14 2nd Sunday of Christmas 3rd Jan 2021 Revd Peter Jones

Here we are on the very first Sunday of the new year, the second Sunday of Christmas in the church calendar. When we have been out for walks over the past few days, we have been greeting those we meet with a “Happy New Year”. However, for many, it is such a difficult time, and we don’t truly know what is ahead.

My father sent me a message on WhatsApp today that he taken as a clip from the Times News Paper. It said:

‘”Let’s not rush to celebrate 2021 being the end of misfortunes, warns Jonathan Healey, a history fellow at Oxford, who makes his point about the twists of fate with what he claims is a little-known diary entry by Samuel Pepys 355 years ago. “The year of our Lord 1665 hath been such a terrible one for ye plague,” he wrote. “I cannot wait for 1666, for which I have a special excitement to trye the newe bakery that hath opened on Pudding Lane.”’

Now I must admit that I’m slightly sceptical about how authentic that quote is. But it is a great quote, isn’t it? It helps us recognise that we have had a terrible year, and we hope that this coming year is going to be better. But we do not know what is ahead. We do know already that the first few months of this coming year are still going to continue to be a trial. Here I am standing in the church, but there is no congregation. We have had to close the churches around here again. But we hope, we pray, that life will return to what we consider is more of a normal time.

Well, our passage from the lectionary comes from Jeremiah, Chapter 31 versus 7-14. Let me help with a little bit of context before I read that passage to you:

Jeremiah started writing at the time when the northern part of Israel had already been carried off into exile, some, over 100 years earlier, and here he is writing at a time when Jerusalem itself was about to be sacked and the people taken away. And before he finished writing the book, most had already been taken into exile, and they were then looking back with a longing to what they used to have. Jeremiah in the first part of this book has been saying, just change your ways, repent, so that the Lord may listen to you and bless you. Change your ways, and It will go so much better for you and you will know the love of your Lord God.

Now we come to our passage where Jeremiah has been saying that same thing in different ways for years and years. And now the Lord gives him a vision, in which, he is given this wonderful image of what the future holds. And as he’s been given this vision, there is an outworking of this vision in the very near future, when the people of Jerusalem will return to restore Jerusalem. Later on, there will be a second working out of this same message of restoration with the coming of Jesus, bringing hope and the truth of the Gospel news, the Kingdom of God is here. And ultimately, a third fulfilling of this revelation, when Jesus will come again. So just before our passage in Chapter 31, the beginning of the chapter starts with:

““At that time declares the Lord, I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they shall be my people.” Thus says the LORD: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” V1-3

There we read about Gods ‘grace’ in the wilderness, and it reminds us of the original exodus from Egypt through the wilderness into the Promised land. And God is reminding them that he has loved his people with an ‘everlasting love’. This really sets the scene for what we are now going to read from verse 7 onwards:

Jeremiah 31:7-14 English Standard Version (Anglicised)

**7**For thus says the Lord:
“Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
    and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;
proclaim, give praise, and say,
    ‘O Lord, save your people,
    the remnant of Israel.’
**8**Behold, I will bring them from the north country
    and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
    the pregnant woman and she who is in labour, together;
    a great company, they shall return here.
**9**With weeping they shall come,
    and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back,
I will make them walk by brooks of water,
    in a straight path in which they shall not stumble,
for I am a father to Israel,
    and Ephraim is my firstborn.
**10**“Hear the word of the Lord, O nations,
    and declare it in the coastlands far away;
say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him,
    and will keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock.’
**11**For the Lord has ransomed Jacob
    and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.
**12**They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
    and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord,
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
    and over the young of the flock and the herd;
their life shall be like a watered garden,
    and they shall languish no more.
**13**Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
    and the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy;
    I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.
**14**I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance,
    and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness,
declares the Lord.”

So there is God giving a vision to Jeremiah to pass onto the people. It is a message of great hope. Jeremiah himself would not see the fulfilling of that, but the people of Israel would. And later on, they would see it through Jesus Christ, and we shall also see it in the future.

Did you notice how God said that he would lead them by ‘brooks of water’, and later that he would keep Israel as a Shepherd keeps his flock. It reminds us of Psalm 23 which Jeremiah would also have known. It contains that wonderful image of God laying out that banquet for King David. He had all those trials coming against him, but he knew that by the still waters his soul would be restored. Here God has been giving Jeremiah two different images for us to relate to him. One of the images shows God as the Father with the son, Israel. The other is God, as husband to his wife, Israel. Throughout Jeremiah, the image has been very much about the deliberately rebellious and disobedient son going his own way. And yet, the father continues to love the son with everlasting love; just longing for the Son to come back truly. And the other image of the husband shows God longing for his wife to turn back to him and love him. This is not God being ‘needy’ but knowing what is the very best thing for the wife, for Israel to be, the faithful bride.

It is remarkable: this wife who’d gone off, was unfaithful, even adulterous with other gods, and yet our Lord God continued to want his wife to return to him. God, before and after our passage, talks about this wife coming back and then being known once more as the virgin bride. It is an image of complete restoration: the people of Israel completely restored and blessed. Early on in Jeremiah, he talks about God not hearing their prayers. It is not that God doesn’t hear their prayers, but that God wouldn’t respond to their prayers. Why? Perhaps because the people had shown in their actions and their attitudes that they may be praying earnestly for God’s help, but what they haven’t done, was truly to have turned back to God in repentance and faith. It was only skin deep, word deep, not heart deep, not soul deep. They had not truly turned back to him, but here there is a point where God is saying: You will, those who are left, the remnant, will come back, and you will be blessed and encouraged. This is a great promise of restoration.

That repentance that God is calling them to do, does not earn them the grace of God. We don’t earn the grace of God. God’s grace is poured on us like a free gift. But that grateful response to hearing this good news as restoration, hearing the good news of God’s promise and mercy, is to waken us that desire to repent and turn once more to the Lord, to know His eternal blessings.

The other reading for today, comes from John, Chapter One, verses 10-18. St John has just been teaching his readers that all things were created through the Son and now the Son of God is in his created world. And in verse 12 we are told:

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name. He gave the right to become children of God. Who were born, not a blood, nor of the will of the flash, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

Those who believe in his name get the right to become children of God. It speaks of a change of our relationship to God. It is a change where we truly recognise God as our Father, as the husband of the bride, the church of God, God’s people. What does that mean? It means that we can live in His love and grace.

But that doesn’t mean to say that the trials of the world may just suddenly disappear and be fine. We know we’ve got these wonderful vaccines that have been developed, and we hope that over the coming months life, will get restored back to the life that we had. There are still trials, but we still have so much as well. But ultimately, we must keep our eyes fixed on God himself. Trusting Him, thanking Him, having that hope before us of his ultimate restoration. We will be so restored, that we will once more be like the virgin bride. Like the son who comes back and deeply knows the love and grace of his Father. Eternally loved! And once we have that understanding, then from within the depths of our souls, we can give up to the Lord in repentance all those things that we have done wrong, all that rebellion against him and all the stuff that we do that is not of His ways. With him at the heart of our lives, then we are truly restored. We are His, and we are His children with His eternal blessings. And we have that hope in us to share that good news with all who we know, and to live it out in all that we do. And so, may you be blessed this year and I wish you a happy New Year in the name of Jesus.

Amen