

Lent 5: I will write my law in your hearts

I remember being badgered week after week, year after year by my mum to ‘tidy your room’, ‘Katryn, please tidy your room’. I don’t know where she found the patience to keep good humourly (mostly) reminding. I then left home to join OM and found myself sharing a concrete floor in an unfinished building with four walls and a roof with 20 other women on a mission trip to share good news with Mozambican refugees. When all the sleeping bags are laid out, 10 against each wall with a 4 foot passage down the middle there’s not much space. Unless you keep your stuff tidy, which not all of us did, it soon becomes chaotic. It was during that first trip that the will to keep my space tidy was activated. No one had to badger me. I hated the chaos of other people’s untidiness and so kept my area tidy.

Jeremiah understands the covenant of Sinai as being like my mum having to badger me to keep tidy. A commandment that was often ignored. A commandment that was seldom obeyed. I suppose Israel was like that group of 20 women in an unfinished building, most didn’t tidy, a few did. The team rule was to keep tidy, but many ignored it and it was therefore chaos for everyone until the leader laid down the law and for a while it was bearable. That sounds like the history of Israel in Kings.

The new covenant Jeremiah describes, written on the heart, with no one having to badger and teach you what to do, was like the conversion that happened to me on that mission trip. I understood how being tidy just made life more spacious, less chaotic, easier for myself and for everyone. It was a peaceful, beautiful, loving, respectful of the environment for the whole community. Freeing emotions and energy for living because we weren’t constantly sniping and bickering, fuming about our space.

I had become aware of how selfish untidiness is; how disrespectful, ugly, tiring. The experience caused me to repent of my former ways, to change them completely. My mum didn’t recognise the daughter who came home and was now not only keeping her room in order but quietly helping to keep the house in order and the car.

The ‘new’ covenant is not different from the old, it is the same covenant. Tidiness is tidiness. What’s changed is where the motivation to live the law comes from. How to live in the ways of God hasn’t changed. Where the motivation comes from has changed.

A more complicated way into this sense of a ‘new’ covenant is to pick up on the word ‘husband’ in our text. God as husband. It’s true that what was understood as marriage in the Ancient Near East of Jeremiah’s time is nothing like what marriage looks now. It was usually an economic transaction. Women were possessions of which to dispose to economic advantage.

I wonder whether what we understand marriage as now, how understandings of marriage have evolved as more equal, shared, with love and companionship at the core, actually reflect the heart and intention of God much more?

A covenant which regulates life from the outside in one thing. A wife can fulfil all the duties of shopping, house-keeping, raising children, repairing clothes, selling extra eggs, and so on and it not be anything more than that, functional. A husband may work and provide the income which feeds and clothes and provides for them and it may be nothing more than that, fulfilling a social function. The man and woman may be a husband, a wife but they may not be a partners, companions, soul mates, lovers. Israel treated God functionally. If the wife doesn’t do the jobs well, nicely, replace her. If God isn’t as exciting, easy, undemanding as other religions, replace God. Simple. That’s what Israel and Judah did. God’s people, Israel and Judah, had walked away from the covenant.

I remember contacting a friend of mine in another country and hearing that her marriage had broken down. She was totally unaware that her husband had broken their trust and was having an affair until evidence slapped her in the face. She was devastated, broken, shattered. I was seared by the depth of her pain, her disbelief that this had happened to her. I felt her anger at the deception and betrayal. There was no way that her husband could come back. His new relationship didn’t last long. But the

marriage was broken, irrevocably. Thus was Israel and Judah's infidelity with her husband God. They had broken the covenant. Irretrievably. Finished.

And, God left. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon took God's place and so Israel was left to them. Israel was taken from the place of God's habitation into Exile and the habitation was razed to the ground. Gone. The whole nation's life was turned upside down, plunged into deep introspection for some: Who are we? Israel, God's people or do we become Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian? How do we now live? Where is God? Is there God? Others simply assimilated and lost faith in God.

That time gave the diaspora of Israel and Judah time and space to think, to watch, to wait, to see from a distance more clearly the covenant they had ignored. The unfolding miracle was that they began to encounter God in new ways in Exile under judgement. God had not abandoned them. God was with them in Exile, away from a destroyed Temple. There was such a thing as a community of God's people rooted in Babylon, but not of Babylon. God was not limited to Jerusalem. God has not abandoned them but was with them in Babylon.

So, a new covenant is one that begins from the inside. It's not about being badgered to keep tidy or functioning as a spouse. The covenant that transforms our hearts, that begins from within, speaks of knowing God from within.

That phrase 'know me' can be understood in two ways which complement one another. To know God is to know the story of God's saving acts in the Exodus and to find oneself as the inheritor *and* inhabitant of that story. For us as Christians, it is to know the story of God's saving acts in Jesus Christ and to appropriate that story for ourselves, and hand it on to others. As Christians, to know God is to know ourselves as a community forgiven and adopted into God's family in Jesus Christ.

A second way of understanding the phrase 'to know God' is to affirm that God is the sovereign Lord, not Egypt, Babylon, nation states, capitalist markets, but God. To know God is to live out God's justice in our communities, or as James would put it: faith without works is dead (Jas 2:14ff.). The two work together: as we encounter the stories of God's saving acts and enter into them, we choose now to walk in God's ways.

Knowing God is a communal enterprise, it is entering a community of God's story and walking in God's ways together today. The story hasn't changed, the covenant hasn't changed, but it is no longer enforced from without, but it is lived faithfully from a place of knowing that we are so deeply and irrepressibly loved by God, that we are forgiven by God, that we are 'delighted in' and 'married' to God. I wonder how such knowledge would transform our communities of faith and our life in the world of money sex and power?

Come loving and forgiving God to write your law in our hearts today, that we may know you, love you and serve you all the days of our lives. Amen.

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