

SERMON NOTES: MARCH 22, LENT 4
2 Chronicles 36:15-21; John 3:14-21

2 Chronicles 36:15-21

The Book of Chronicles is a post-exilic collection that was written at a time of renewal in Judaism. The nation had a revitalized priesthood that put forward the Law as the guiding light for all of God's people and it held the Temple sacrifice as essential in building up the life of the nation with their God. These writings push the importance of personal devotion and face up to the problem of the need to deal with past sins as well as the need to keep past glories in a proper perspective. They are also very aware of the promises that were given to the prophets on behalf of the people and their faith in the faithfulness of God.

Today's reading, however, is not one that picks up these themes of hope. We need to read them in the light of the condemnation of the line of kings that ultimately brought about the political end of the nation. The author says of these kings: "they did what was displeasing to Yahweh his God.....". The consequences of this displeasing action was chaos, suffering and eventually deportation into exile.

What is important in this reading is what it says about God. The passage stresses that time and time again God sent along prophets and servants to preach his message of repentance, to urge the people and their leaders to turn around and amend their ways. He raised up thorns in the flesh to challenge them to rethink their ways and to let go of control over their own lives and "ministries". But they just "ridiculed the messengers of God, despised his words and laughed at his prophets". What else could God do but let them be dragged off in chains to Babylon? He gave them options but they chose to ignore them and go down a path that was doomed and God in his sorrow could do nothing else to help them.

It is the last line of our reading (verse 21) that offers us hope. Yes the nation is going to have a break – seventy years in the wilderness he speaks of, but it is in the rest that new life will begin. All they have will be taken from them and they will have to be in a state of powerlessness for seventy years. If they take that seriously and contemplate what it means to let go of control there is hope for them. If they are prepared to allow God to steer them instead of taking over things and managing them and shaping them according to their own desires, then there is a way forward. But whatever of their choices, God will take them from their comfort zones and place them in pagan hands.

This is a tough reading for us today for sometimes it seems as though that is what is happening to our Western Church. Much is being taken away from us. We are growing older and greyer and the world is ignoring us more and more. Even this week we see TabCorp moving to have full gambling facilities on Good Friday. That is a symbol of what is happening in all walks of life: God is moved to the margins. Are we then coming to the end of Christianity in the West?

According to today's reading, no we are not. We may well be going into a period of enforced Sabbath rest but God's promises will not go unfulfilled. We may be running ourselves down into a tiny remnant of what the Church used to be but there are enough faithful disciples who are willing to repent, to turn again to covenant living and it is upon these committed believers that God is building the future Church. For the Hebrews he used a Persian king as his messiah! Odd and unexpected, even slightly heretical but that is what he did. If God can use a pagan king as his instrument there is hope for all of us!

John 3:14-21

The whole of chapter three of John's Gospel is about the need to be "born from above". Somehow, we need to allow the power and grace "from above", that is, from God, to pour over us and transform us. Poor old Nicodemus could not understand what Jesus was saying. He wanted to live "from below", from an earthly perspective, from a perspective that made sense to him, that fitted in with his traditions and expectations. He was earthly bound when God in Jesus was trying to lift him up to the stars.

It was because Nicodemus was "earthly bound" that he could not understand who Jesus was. The evidence was there but he could not see it or decipher it. For him and so for the leaders of Israel, Jesus was a trouble maker, a sinner and dangerous man with dangerous teachings (3:11).

Jesus tells him that he in fact is from heaven and is teaching heavenly things. This is why Nicodemus and the priests and leaders could not understand him. They were evaluating him and his teachings from their earthly perspective. They had to leave something of that behind and come to Jesus, just as the people in the wilderness had to come and look upon the snake lifted up by Moses. (Numbers 21:8). In that story the people sinned by not wanting to follow God's directions. They wanted to enter Canaan via a route of their own choosing. They complained about the food and the water and the conditions they were expected to live in and as a result God sent serpents among them and many died.

They were offered a remedy by the same God who lost patience with them. If they left behind their whinging and complaining and looked upon the serpent that was lifted up by Moses they would live. But they had to actually come to Moses and gaze upon the snake.

Jesus makes the same connections with his own life. He says that sentence has been passed on this generation of God's people. They have seen the light and know that it has come into the world but they have refused to change their ways. They prefer the comfort of darkness because it is in the darkness their false ways can fester and grow without the gaze of people who live in the light falling upon them. But the darkness is killing them. They stumble around in it and in the end kill the one who is their Light! How can that be? How is it that men and women of faith can put the Son of God to death in such a hideous manner?

This question is being asked here at the beginning of John's Gospel because he wants us to read the Gospel in the light of the Cross. For John, the Cross is the defining element in the life of any disciple. It sets out the way we are all called to follow. We must die. We must let go of control of things and trust in the Father's loving and saving presence in our lives. We have to be stripped, removed from our comfortable lives and allow a new resurrected way of living to be given to us. But it all begins by us letting go and trusting God.

Conclusion:

There is hope for us as individuals and as a Church and that is one of the great messages of our Christian faith. God loves us as we are and wants us to be his children. He loves us so much that he sent his only son to save us and that Son loved us enough to die on the cross for our salvation. The way forward, however, is for us to repent – that is, we all need to examine our lives in the light of the Gospel. It is painstaking work, a challenging process but in the end it will allow God to have a chance to speak to us. And we know he will. We know his promises will be fulfilled and that we are the chosen manner of his fulfilling of those promises. The rest is up to us. No one said Lent was easy but the fruits are abundant if we persevere.