

Advent 1, 2012, at Brentwood

What is Right and Just?

**Ps 25:1-10 & Jeremiah 33:14-16
(122, 119, 530, 563)**

December 2, 2012

Jeremiah lived through dark and dreary times
in the history of the Jewish people.
During his lifetime, Jerusalem was destroyed,
the Temple of Solomon torn down,
and the Babylonian exile began.
His calling from God was to be a prophet
– one who spoke for God –
about God's perspective on what was happening.
God's message throughout the mission of this prophet
is two-pronged – forgiveness and repentance.
I will forgive your sinful turning away from me,
your attempts to take over control from me,
and I will restore your flourishing in companionship with me.

More specifically, God through Jeremiah
condemns the Jewish people
for making offerings to other gods
and for worshipping the works of their own hands. (Jer 1:16)

In Jeremiah's call in the opening chapter
of the record of his prophetic ministry that we have in this book,
God assures a reluctant Jeremiah
that there is nothing to fear
because God will be with him throughout this mission.
He is to speak God's word with clarity and confidence,
a word the Jewish people of his day do not want to hear.
There will be trouble and resistance.
But Jeremiah is to be resilient and persist,
with God in his body, mind, heart, and soul
as his strength and wisdom.
Jeremiah is to model and maintain

what is right and just in God's eyes,
from God's perspective.

And that is the key role of the prophetic person
called to serve God in the midst of a people
who have forgotten or are ignoring
that God's presence, power, and purpose.
The prophet is to help the people see things differently,
to 'redeem,' or see afresh, the dynamics
of the situation in which they find themselves.
In the face of both arrogance and abject dismay,
the prophet brings a word of hope and redemption –
of forgiveness and restoration.

The small section of Jeremiah's story that we read this morning
comes following the Babylonian captivity,
following Jeremiah's advice to settle down in Babylon,
to pray for that city and work for its welfare,
because in its welfare lies their own. (Jer 29:4-7)

That welfare is rooted in righteousness and justice,
in doing what is right and just.
What is righteous, from the Jewish and Christian perspectives,
is what pleases God.
It is what is revealed about our relationship with God
in the law and the prophets.
These sources of wisdom talk primarily
about how God wants us to relate to the source of our beings,
other beings, and our own being.
In short, as Jesus summarized,
love the Lord your God with all your strength, mind, heart, and soul
and love your neighbour as yourself.
And it's not just those who live close and with whom you feel comfortable,
but it's the strangers on the sides of roads where you travel
who have suffered injustices that injure.
In this teaching, Jesus said,
contains the essence of all the law and prophets.

Simple and profound.

There is, however, at least one confusing thing
about this profound simplicity
that continues to mislead people
about the nature of God's righteousness and justice
as revealed in the coming, work and witness of Jesus Christ.

What God did first in Jesus Christ
was to offer forgiveness.

This is not what we expect,
even now, some two thousand years after God took flesh
for our salvation and the salvation of everything around us.
We still expect we have to be right and just to earn forgiveness.
That's not how it works with the Christian God.
Forgiveness comes first, a free gift for our flourishing.
Then, our of gratitude, come deeds love, righteousness, and justice,
ways of being with God, with each other, and with ourselves
that bless the creation.

Simple to imagine, perhaps, but so hard to believe and do.
Indeed, we need to rely completely on God's grace,
moment by moment, breath by breath,
to help us see things this way and act accordingly.

But consider the difference these attitudes and behaviours would make –
for Israel and Palestine,
for tribal and ethnic tensions around the world,
for the relationship between rich and poor,
for families caught up in violence and abuse,
for those killing each other in the name of religious extremism,
for those harbouring hatreds over generations.

It's such a simple message of hope –
fear not, forgive, and love.

It's the satisfaction of our deepest longings as human beings.
It's the fulfillment of the hopes that God has sown deep in our souls,
the sense of dignity and worth we have been given as our birthright
as beloved children created in the image of our Father/Mother God.

Advent for Christians is the season when we anticipate,
when we refresh our memories of what God's coming does,
what aspirations and hopes Jesus Christ satisfies and fulfills.

Our passage this morning from Jeremiah
reminds us that righteousness and justice for all
are a central part of the Reign of Christ
inaugurated with God's becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

*May these thoughts and urgings be used by the Holy Spirit
to form us all for witness to the mission of Jesus Christ.*

Preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian Fraser
Minister with Brentwood Presbyterian Church