

We have continued reading as our Old Testament Lesson from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. Up to this point, Jeremiah has spoken of judgement, of destruction. He has gone on to speak of the need for the exiles to put down roots in the land of their captivity. But now the mood begins to change, we hear words of new beginnings, he talks not of breaking down and destroying but in terms of building and planting.

But this is not a matter of re-starting, of picking up pieces from the past. This is nothing less than a new beginning, founded on a new covenant. This is a covenant not to be written on tablets of stone but one to be written on the heart.

I just want to explore this whole area of new beginnings. To begin with, I invite you to cast your minds back to May 2011, to the State Dinner in Dublin Castle at which President May McAleese welcomed Queen Elizabeth 2nd to Ireland. Quite apart from the Queen's unexpected fluency in the Irish language, both said some very profound things about this whole business of new beginnings. These remarks may have been said in the context of a new beginning in Anglo Irish relations but they speak words of truth into many other situations in the life of both communities and individuals.

Looking to our shared past, the Queen said:

To all those who have suffered as a consequence of our troubled past, I extend my sincere thoughts and deep sympathy. With the benefit of historical hindsight we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently, or not at all."

Looking to the future, President McAleese said:

the visit was a culmination of the success of the peace process.
"It is an acknowledgment that while we cannot change the past, we have chosen to change the future,

An essential part of new beginnings is recognising where we are starting from, the reality of the past, the mistakes, the missed opportunities. In the words of the Queen, ‘with the benefit of historical hindsight, we can all see things which we wish had been done differently if not at all.’

By the same token new beginnings are just that. We cannot, we must not be held prisoner to the past. In the words of President McAleese, ‘while we cannot change the past, we have chosen to change the future.’

We see here, in words spoken in Dublin Castle that night, the essential elements of new beginnings. There has to be an honesty about the past and along with that a resolve to change. There is a thoroughly Biblical word that comes to mind as I reflect on that. It is redemption. It is a thread that runs right through the whole biblical narrative. We see this encapsulated in our Old Testament Lesson today, as Jeremiah looks forward to a new dawn, a new beginning, a new Covenant.

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah 31.33ff

We see it in the Incarnation, the coming of God among us in the person of Jesus. Much of the writing of the New Testament is a working out of the

implications of the Incarnation, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in terms of New Covenant, new beginnings. Paul, in writing to the Colossians, using language reminiscent of a Roman Imperial triumph, writes:

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it. *Col 2:13ff*

Then, looking to the future he continues a little later on in this same letter:

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. *Col 3:1ff*

In one sense the work is done. In another you and I are still a work in progress. We are continually invited to embrace this letting go of the past and laying hold of the future in our prayers of confession and absolution in public and private prayer. Paul has that lovely expression of ‘growing into Christ’, becoming what he has already made us, members of the Body of Christ.

But this letting go of the past and laying hold of the future has to be more than a matter of private piety, simply a matter between myself and my maker. Speaking in the context of personal relationships, personal conflict, Jesus reminded his hearers:

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift *Matthew 5:23,24*

This is expressed beautifully in the Invitation to Confession in the old order of Holy Communion.

Ye that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways;

I remember at the time of the paramilitary Ceasefires in Northern Ireland and the first tentative steps were made in the talks that culminated in the Good Friday Agreement, reflecting on the difference between conflict and reconciliation. When you are in conflict with someone, you don't actually have to listen. When you move towards reconciliation, you have to start to listen, to understand, to recognise the worth of the other person.

When that begins to happen, we can begin to see the past differently, we can begin to see the future differently. This is the place of new beginnings, this is the place of redemption.

There is a prayer of confession that we often use in the family service that brings these different threads together:

Most merciful God,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
we confess that we have sinned
in thought, word and deed.
We have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.
In your mercy
forgive what we have been,
help us to amend what we are,
and direct what we shall be;
that we may do justly,
love mercy,
and walk humbly with you, our God.
Amen.