

WISDOM OF THE SECRET HEART

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Jeremiah 31: 31-34 - A law written on their hearts
Psalm 51 - Wisdom in my secret heart
Hebrews 5: 5-10 - Jesus, high priest
John 12: 20-33 - A grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies

The four readings from scripture today have a common motif that runs through them. It's this renewal, this dying and renewal that is so close to the heart of our Christian tradition. It's "the way," the way of life that Jesus offers us.

Jeremiah talks about the covenant. The heart of the Jewish tradition is this covenant relationship between the people and God. It had its roots centuries before the time of Jeremiah, but Jeremiah spoke to the people on God's behalf during the time of the most painful crisis of their history. It was just before and into the time of the Exile when the Assyrians had been conquering and establishing an imperial dynasty. Other nations had fallen, and Israel was about to fall, too. Finally it did fall, and their capital was destroyed, their king dethroned, the king's sons murdered, and the people exiled. The strategy was simply to destroy the peoples' sense of identity by taking away the symbols of their identity, and moving the people out of their homeland so that everyone in the whole imperial dynasty would become a loyal Assyrian.

The story of the Exile is about how the people of Israel hung on to their identity even without their palace, without their capital, without their monarch. What they had was their faith, but even their faith was in crisis because this God, with whom they had been in covenant and from whom they felt there was a promise of love and care and support forever, seemed to have forgotten. The psalmists even say things like "My God, have you forgotten to be merciful? Are you asleep?" And so prophets like Jeremiah helped the people rethink their understanding of their faith, helped them make sense of this disaster--of this seeming loss of everything that meant anything to them. So he spoke words like these great words from Chapter 31 and 32: "There was an old covenant written in stone and you broke it."

Now at that point, you see, the people can look at that and say "Okay, that's the end. We had a covenant, we had a God, and we broke the covenant. It's gone." Jeremiah says "That's right, it's broken, you've lost it." But God says "I'm going to make a new covenant, not just put it back together the way it was. I'm going to make a new covenant with the House of Israel. It will be a covenant that's not written in stone. It will be a covenant that will be written in their hearts. And even more than written in their hearts [going beyond today's reading and into the next chapter which returns to the same idea of the new covenant], I will give them one heart and one way." So it's not a denial of the destruction and the loss that the people went through; it's saying this is the way, the spiritual path into the loss and the breaking. And then, from that, something new comes to life.

Along with that we have the beautiful words of Psalm 51: “Have mercy on me, O God.” This Psalm is one of the few with a common name--“*Miserere*,” which is the Latin word for “mercy.” I always thought it strange that a hospital in Edmonton is called “Misericordia.”--it sounded like something to do with “misery”--until I learned the meaning of the Latin word “*Miserere*.” Along with “*cordia*” it is “merciful heart.” *Miserere*--have mercy on me, O God. It’s this deep and profound prayer for mercy. The mercy of God is what Jeremiah is describing when he is helping the people understand that God’s faithfulness is not about a life that has no suffering, no tragedy, no brokenness. Rather, the mercy of God comes during those moments of brokenness, of loss, when we even feel like dying. We can embrace those moments, live through them into a new life that comes from beyond.

And so we have these wonderful words: “Create in me a clean heart, O God.” This is a Psalm that doesn’t dance only on the bright side of life; rather, it has a very deep sense of the guilt and the sin. If we can just step out of the Victorian moralism that has distorted our understanding of that part of our faith and hear what this really meant, we will hear something that we can all recognize. Whereas Jeremiah spoke to a nation--a people as a whole--the Psalmist is speaking to or for our own individual experiences and the moments in our lives when we come to feel that we have made mistakes, have gone down the wrong paths, have hurt people we love, have messed things up in a way that feels irreversible, and we’re left with regrets. It’s not that we spend our lives wallowing in that, but it does happen. Life comes to those moments when we seem to have lost our way.

And this wonderful prayer, “*Miserere*, have mercy on me, O God,” is deeply rooted in that hope and promise of renewal and new life. “Create in me a clean heart, a new heart. Put a right and new spirit within me.” And it’s focussing on the inner life. That’s what the word “heart” as a metaphor in the Old Testament always means. It means the inner life. In the story of the call of King David, God says through the prophet Nathan that he doesn’t look at the externals. In choosing a king he wasn’t looking for the biggest, the strongest, the most handsome, and all of that. Rather, God looks at the inner self, at the heart, at what’s inside.

And so the focus is on the heart. The Psalmist in number 51 says: “You desire truth in the inward being. Therefore, teach me wisdom in my secret heart.” It takes us to that inner life, and the reason that some people go through their whole lives afraid to look deeply inward is simply that they fear it will be painful to see what is really there. Without faith they will never be able to look deeply. But this faith offers us the trust in the promise that allows us to move ever and ever more deeply into the inner self, into the heart, even though some of what we encounter may be painful, may even feel like dying. We have the assurance and the promise that, beyond that death, in God’s mercy there is a new heart, a clean heart. The wisdom we need, the truth we need, to live from the centre of our being is a gift from God that can be given anew and recreated anew over and over again.

In today’s Gospel--the John reading--Jesus is teaching and he begins to talk about his own anticipated death. The disciples struggle with that, but never really understand what is going to happen. It’s not until they look back much, much later that they really come to understand. As a matter of fact, much of John’s gospel itself is written long afterward,

looking back and giving the explanation, the understanding to which they have come. In this passage we have these great words from Jesus: "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain." He's saying that, if by some chance we could keep our lives all together and make them just be happy and in control all the way, and if we could somehow secure our own salvation and feel fine, all we would have is one little grain. That's all we would ever be. If our lives are about saving ourselves, then we get to save ourselves and that's all we have. But when it comes time for life to draw to a close we need much more than that. We need a life that has been given, that has been dedicated, that has been devoted, to something much larger than ourselves. And in order to get there, the way or the path or the process is a letting go of ourselves. It's not hanging on; it's letting go of our own lives. It's like a seed that gets dropped into the ground and grows and multiplies and is transformed into something else and becomes far, far more than it ever was.

When Marcus Borg struggles with passages, including this one, in John's gospel he says one of the really big problems we have in Christianity is a passage just a little before this where Jesus says: "I am the way, and the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father but by me." This passage has been turned by Christian exclusivists into a statement of exclusivity-- that we can be saved only by believing in Jesus. Borg says what John means--and it's understood in this very passage--is that Jesus is the way, and the way is that of the seed dying and then living anew. The way is giving up our lives, spending them, losing them, dying, and then being reborn into ever and ever fuller lives. That's what Jesus meant when he said "I am the way," and no one comes to the Father but by that way, that way. That's not an exclusivistic claim at all. As a matter of fact it's precisely the opposite, according to Borg, because one of the elements that all spiritual and religious traditions of the world have in common is dying and being reborn--losing self and then finding a deeper and a fuller sense of self. That is the universal way of life into the sacred, into the fullness.

And that's the heart of the Christian gospel. That's the truth, the wisdom of the inner heart which Jesus offered. It was there in Jeremiah's teachings, it has always been there, and it will always be there. We just have to learn it over and over again and again as we perpetually die, let go of life, and then receive it in an ever-new and an ever-broader and an ever-widening way.

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