

Sermon for 21 March 2021

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Jeremiah 31.31–34

John 12.20–33

Our readings today speak of in terms of great and momentous movements of history. Jeremiah 31 famously proclaims the coming of the “new covenant”. And John 12 has Jesus equally famously proclaiming “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Today I want to explore these readings a little and explore what they mean to us. And then I want us to turn our attention to thinking about a possible new CAP (Christians Against Poverty) Debt Centre in the Tyne Valley. This is something I need to explore with you anyway and I think it is a kind of worked example that spotlights some of what today’s readings are talking about.

The first thing I want to notice with respect to the readings is that the Bible is made up of two parts, the books of the old covenant and the books of the new covenant. We all know that we call these the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament”. What is less known is that the word “testament” is a translation of exactly the same Greek word as “covenant”, the word διαθήκη (diathēkē).

One way of talking about the Bible, therefore, is to talk about the two covenants.

It is these two covenants that Jeremiah is specifically referring to, the “old” covenant with the people of Israel and the “new” covenant which, as we will see, is for everyone.

This is interesting because Jeremiah is a book of the Old Testament. It is an old covenant book. And in common with other old covenant books, Jeremiah points to the new covenant to come. The new covenant is the ultimate culmination and fulfilment of the old covenant. That’s why our Bible does not consist just of the New Testament. We need both to fully appreciate what is going on in the relationship between God and his people and his creation.

You will probably be familiar with some of the other Old Testament texts that point to the new covenant. They do not always use the language of “covenant” because this is a huge subject which can be approached from many different angles. But they are all talking about the same thing.

So, for example, all the texts which we would call “messianic prophecies” are talking about the fulfilment of the old covenant when the messiah comes and ushers in the new covenant. Isaiah 11 is a famous example, it begins by saying:

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and

understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

And it goes on to describe a perfect world where all people and creation live together in harmony and with complete well-being. It sums this up with:

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

The promises in the Old Testament also so often point to the new covenant. Even the promise to Abraham, the patriarch of the people of Israel (i.e. their chief ancestor), look beyond just Israel. In Genesis 22, the angel of the Lord says to Abraham:

I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies

That's talking about the old covenant people. But the promise goes on to talk about the future new covenant people as we:

by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.

Another great new covenant theme is liberty. Under the old covenant God was always concerned about freedom from oppression, especially for those least able to defend themselves. This spills through into a glorious prophecy of the new covenant in the text from Isaiah 61 which Jesus later attributed to himself:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour

Now, we might wonder just how this connects with the reading from John 12. Indeed we might wonder many things about John 12. It starts with some Greek people wanting to meet Jesus. When told about this, Jesus starts talking about the Son of Man being glorified and seeds falling to the ground. But if we keep on listening to Jesus we find that he is talking about the great, momentous events that are now at hand in which he will ultimately draw all people to himself.

This is it, he says! This is the hour! This is what all the prophets were talking about. It is for this hour that Jesus has come. It is in this hour that Jesus will be glorified. It is in this hour that he will be raised up from the Earth. It is in this hour that he will be the seed which dies and is buried. It is in this hour that he will spring up again from within the earth and bear much fruit. This is the hour of the new covenant. This is the hour of liberty. This is the hour where the good news will come to all the nations.

This is, ultimately, what the Greek foreigners are seeking, the time when they will become part of God's covenant people.

Now, because this is John's gospel, there is still far more going on. Yes, Jesus is the seed that falls to the ground and dies. But as an extension, so are we. We come into the new

covenant through the death of Jesus, but we also come in through our own death to sin. In our baptism, we go down into the waters and the old kind of person dies. When we rise from the waters we do so as a new kind of person, as a new creation.

That is why Jesus also says in John 12 “Whoever serves me must follow me” and “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Following Jesus involves loss and sacrifice. And through this loss and sacrifice, God’s good and perfect future comes.

Hebrews 8 and 9 are a masterly work on all this. These chapters link together the old covenant with the new covenant and explain how death is central to this and even why the English word “testament” is apt. We know the word “testament” in the context of the phrase “last will and testament”. In Greek, the word διαθήκη, which I mentioned earlier, means both “covenant” and “will”. Hebrews 9 says:

For this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant (διαθήκη), so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant (διαθήκη). Where a will (διαθήκη) is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will (διαθήκη) takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. Hence not even the first covenant (διαθήκη) was inaugurated without blood.

It is the blood of Jesus that activates the new covenant just as a last will and testament is activated on the death of the person who made the will. And because Jesus has died, we can be certain that the new covenant is now in effect.

So the old and new covenants are, indeed, also the old and new testaments. And we are the people of the new covenant or new testament. We are the Greeks who were seeking Jesus. We now live in the light of all this.

Now, I want to turn our attention to Christians Against Poverty. The Tyne Valley does not presently have a CAP Debt Centre but there are a group of church leaders who are talking about whether, together, we could establish one. This would become a local ministry of covenant people setting other people free from slavery to debt.

CAP is for all people, just as the new covenant is. And, indeed, whilst CAP will work with anyone to get them debt free, whether or not they are a Christian, it also always invites clients to become Christians. The invitation is to be free of far much more than just debt. It is an invitation to be part of God’s new covenant. For this reason CAP only ever partners with churches and not with other charitable or volunteer organisations.

In our live service we will watch a video from the CAP website. You can watch it too if you visit <https://capuk.org/about-us/the-cap-story>.

I think CAP is an outworking of the fulfilled promises we have been exploring today. I would love to see a CAP Debt Centre in the Tyne Valley. But I also think we must be very careful and wise as a church in deciding whether to be involved and that level of involvement to offer.

I have discussed this with the PCC and we think we know how we want to respond, but we also decided to tell the church as a whole what we are thinking.

Here are the possible ways we can be involved:

1. Do we believe it is the right thing to do to start a local CAP Debt Centre?

Yes, as a PCC, we do think it is right for at least someone to do this.

2. Do we believe we should be the “lead church”?

Ideally one church would volunteer to be the “lead church” who are the primary partners with CAP and who do all the admin, including employing a “centre manager”. The PCC does not think we should offer to be the lead church.

3. Would we commit to being part of an oversight committee for the CAP Debt Centre?

Personally, I don't think I could commit to this. Is there a church member who might represent our PCC in this way?

4. Might we have the person who could be the “centre manager”?

The centre manager is the person who does all the visiting of CAP clients. For each client there are three visits. The centre manager connects the client with the central CAP team and aids them in getting all their information together for the central CAP team to come up with a debt recovery plan.

The centre manager is not the debt councillor. But they are very much the person who will invite the client into a relationship with Jesus.

CAP provides all the necessary training and what they are looking for is someone who able to be organised, who has a passion for sharing Jesus with others and who has the necessary pastoral skills.

Generally centre managers are paid and work 16 hours week.

Are you the right person for the job? Is there someone else in our church who we think might be?

5. Would we support the CAP Debt Centre in prayer and financially?

The CAP Debt Centre will cost about £20k a year to run. For one church this would be too much but spread across churches we hope and believe it will not be. The PCC feels we could make a CAP Debt Centre one of the mission projects which receive money from our “tithes”, the 10% of church income which we give away.

But there is also scope for individual church members contributing funding to the project as well out of their own generosity over and above their tithe. Might you be one of them?

Far more important than money is prayer. Would we as a church and individuals support a CAP Debt Centre with prayer?

6. Might you be a “helper”?

The centre manager always takes another person with them when visiting a client. Ideally this would be someone from a local church who lives close to the client. This person's role will be to provide additional care and support and to aid in sharing the gospel with the client. We will need many such helpers. Might you be one of them?

These are the questions we are exploring. I think we are tending towards being very supportive of the idea, but less directly involved. Perhaps a few of our church members will be personally more involved. Please think and pray about this and if you have any insight as to how we should be responding as a church or if you feel personally drawn to being involved please let me know.

Amen.