

Sermon 4 January 2015
'God's Unifying Compulsion' Jeremiah 31:7-14 Ephesians 1:3-14

Prayer: God of all creation, you do not forget your people. You long to celebrate with us, but there are times when we put blocks in place that prevent you coming close. Break through all that by opening our hearts to being able to celebrate like yours, and may we too be compulsive about unity. Amen.

Welcome to the first Sunday of 2015, and of all the things we might have to launch us into another year – our theme title today is 'God's Unifying Compulsion'. God is compulsive about bringing all things together, into unity – not conformity, **unity** which to me is a place of celebration of difference in thought, means, heart, service, expectation and ... well everything really because that's the way God made us from the beginning. So as we here, at St Johns, go into a new year – with our Vision statement of 'Being the Gospel to all people' – we have as our start an offering for reflection on God's unifying compulsion!

As a base for our reflections we have two Scripture readings – one from the prophet Jeremiah and one from the letter to the people of Ephesus – the Ephesians. One speaks of God's promise to his people and the other speaks of our inclusion into God's people as always being part of the great Divine plan, we were predestined to belong **because God is compulsive** about gathering his creation close, into unity in Him.

The Jeremiah reading today is a little ray of sunshine in the whole book,^{1*} The words in this reading come in the middle of what is a happy and content segment of the book. There joyful and celebratory words, which stand in contrast to those found in chapters 1-29 and 34-52. They are inspirational **and remind** the people of Israel of the promises made by God to them. More importantly they stand as a stark reminder that God has not forgotten about them.

Other chapters of Jeremiah often seem bleak and can be a constant stream of judgement, but these three chapters provide a **key insight** into what God actually **wants** for his people. These promises talk powerfully of the blessings that God looks to provide to his people, in the middle of their daily living, **no matter where** that might be. And more importantly they give us an opportunity to explore the promises that God has made to each one of us and **how we choose** to respond to God's goodness and grace.

The amazing promises in these words come out of dark prophecies/ dark times, not least because Jeremiah is a 'reluctant sixth-century prophet'!^{*2} His prophecies for the most part "reflect the political situation of the last days of the then independent kingdom of Judah as it struggled against the Neo-Babylonian empire. The powers of Babylonian won; Jerusalem and the temple were captured and destroyed (587–586 BCE). It felt like all hope was gone; Jeremiah was right when he read the signs of the times and seen Israel as broken and scattered.

But in the mysterious way of belief, Jeremiah's faith and trust in God **assured** him that the political turmoil and ruling powers would never overcome God's justice and love. Just after our reading is the declaration that God will offer a new covenant, new agreement, new 'legal promise' that will bind Him to his people *again* (31:31–34).

So the midst of loss and despair, Jerusalem's destruction, Judah and Israel's humiliation to Babylon, and her people being marched off into exile, **Jeremiah proclaims good news from God**: "Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O Virgin Israel! (31:4) Again you shall plant vineyards...and shall enjoy the fruit" (31:5). Then, this promise for a redeemed Israel, "Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy. I will comfort them and give them gladness for sorrow" (Jeremiah 31:13)."

Amazing words of promise that God is still with them, has **not let them go** and will be with them for all new beginnings. God will call them together again – in fact God will call **all people no-one** will be

^{1*} CofScotland Rev Michael Mair, Minister of St David's Broomhouse, Edinburgh ^{*2} Seasons MediaCom Background ^{*3} H Wallace ^{*4} W Loader

excluded. Can you hear the echoes resounding of God's compulsion for unity for all his people? ^{*2}These are words of hope, renewed promises that come like rain refreshing a parched land. This is a poetic section and easily reads as a love letter from God, for his beloved people. ^{*3ff}

The fascinating message in these words is that their celebration and joy come in the middle of dark times, not just the experiences of war-losses etc, but also the faith sense that God was **NOT** with them – because of the “troubles”. In the language of poetry, the reader is lifted out of the place of hurt into a new possibility; the language shows us the new reality that God works in the midst of painful experience. It shows us what is possible with God. In the language of the poet, the wilderness is the place where God's people experience God's grace again. They have survived and emerged, **and** God is with them, *still*.

And so they celebrate – all of them celebrate. ^{*3}H Wallace writes: ‘These people sing their hymns out of the experience of hurt. There is no celebration of ‘God with us’ without knowing what ‘God not with us’ is like. That knowledge changes the shape of the celebration. It gives it both a substance and a resolution that could not be known otherwise. This is not to say in some flippant way that the exile was necessary, or that God uses suffering to teach people his ways: ‘no pain, no gain’. (Rather..)

Rather, it is to recognise that the time of pain, brought on by the people's past, now becomes the place where God is present to them, even when it seems God is absent. The celebration in today's passage is not just because the period of absence has passed. **It is a celebration of the presence discovered in absence.** A presence who will stop at nothing to gather together His people, unifying them by His presence, in His name.

It is this characteristic of God that is behind the thinking of the writer to the people of Ephesus, when he wrote about us being *predestined* to belong to God through Jesus. Predestination is a difficult theological concept for me – but I can happily live with us being predestined to being claimed / adopted by God through Jesus because we are loved – always have been and always will be. In this section the concept of predestination is bounded by, grounded in the love of God for all his people, no matter where they are.

All are now, included – ancient Hebrew, modern Israel and gentiles – (that's us in traditional Jewish language), we are included because of Jesus. ^{*4} So our passage celebrates the inclusion of Gentiles into the promises of God, celebrating that all the barriers which discriminated against them, the biblical law and its accretions, **have been broken down**. The passage foreshadows verses that will speak of the unity of Jew and Gentile in Jesus. It is the power of Jesus, the Christ that brings down dividing walls and establishes a unity that overcomes human systems that *perpetrate* separation. We divide, God unifies.

What had been the case for all within Israel; the sense of being chosen, of being redeemed and forgiven, of being informed about the divine plan for the world (1:3-11), **is now applied** to those once excluded ('and you, too,.. 1:11). We are not forgotten, God – our destiny, is compelled to bring us together in His name through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have not been left in the wilderness of God's absence, God is with us *as we celebrate at Christmas*.

In our passage the blessings of belonging / adoption are described in various ways but pre-eminence is given to redemption and forgiveness of sins **according to the riches of God's grace**. Grace is an essential part of the mix that fuels the power of God's actions – in bringing people together. Grace that has been “lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding” because being adopted alters “whose” we are. For us to live in the riches of God's grace, with the blessings of being divinely adopted we have to hold onto the promise of God to be with us – no matter where we go, or how we serve.

And I think it helps us to remember God is compulsive about wanting to include us, and gathering us close in unity with Him through Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.