



Sermon: 19 October 2025

Rev. Hugh Perry

Jeremiah 31:27-34

Our reading this morning from Jeremiah moves from impending doom to coming restoration but there is still the prophet's sting in the message. The old covenant had been broken so there needed to be a new covenant. Rather than the law being written on tablets of stone it will be written on the people's hearts. The new covenant will become part of the people's total being.¹

Claudia Orange writes that Hone Heke used to speak of the Treaty as the new covenant and Ngāpuhi continue to regard the Treaty as a sacred covenant that both unites all Maori tribes and acts as a bond of union between races.²

Judith Binney suggested that the Ringatū church has survived because of the memory of the harsh experiences of the 1860s but also affirmed God's binding covenant.³ A covenant expressed in gratitude by Te Kooti who said 'This is the word of Jehovah. 'I will be a God to them, and they will be a people to me.'

Hear what the spirit is saying to the Church.

Thanks be to God.

Luke 18:1-8

This is the story of the unjust judge and the persistent widow. In remembering that this is a parable it is important not to see God as the unjust judge.

This parable is used by Luke to reassure the marginalised emerging church that, because an unjust judge when pestered by the most marginalised, the widow, might finally give in, they should expect a just God to give the marginalised and dispossessed justice.⁴

Bill Loader writes that we should not treat the passage as a general teaching about intercessory prayer because it is primarily about the yearning for change. The poor widow

¹ Maurice Andrew *The Old Testament in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: DEFT 1999), pp. 473, 474.

² C. Orange, *The Treaty of Waitangi* (Wellington: Allen & Unwin/Port Nicholson Press, 1987) pp.90-91, 150, in Maurice Andrew *The Old Testament in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: DEFT 1999), p. 474.

³ J Binney, *Redemption Songs* p.429 in in Maurice Andrew *The Old Testament in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: DEFT 1999), p. 474.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock *Luke. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2009), pp. 207- 209.

represents persistence, but she also represents poverty and vulnerability which is the point of the parable's message.

The story has been shaped in the cruelty of exploitation and the arbitrary abuse of power which was part of Jesus' world and these are the people whose cries he hears.⁵

Sermon

Wikipedia tells us that 'May you live in interesting times' is an English expression that is claimed to be a translation of a traditional Chinese curse. The expression is ironic with the 'interesting' times understood as troubling times.

Unfortunately, although the saying is common in English no actual Chinese source has ever been found.⁶ Perhaps, it's related to the habit we so easily fall into of blaming others for the bad things and claiming credit for good things for ourselves.

Never mind. Jeremiah certainly lived in interesting times and he blamed God. Biblical scholars suggest that Jeremiah was aware that his King was trying to make an alliance with Egypt, and Assyria saw Egypt as a threat. Absolute Monarchs and American Presidents don't like their foreign policies to be criticised any more than coalition governments do. So, Jeremiah was put in a well. That had no effect on the Assyrians, and they sacked Jerusalem and took the leadership back to Babylon as slaves.

Jeremiah was a loyal Jew and believed the exile was divine punishment. But he still believed they were God's people. So, he was sure the time of exile would pass and both Judah and Israel would be restored.

History confirms his prophesy along with the fact that bad foreign policy on behalf of their king was to blame for the Assyrian invasion and subsequent exile in Babylonia.

In seeing the exile as divine punishment Jeremiah also saw a time when their sentence was served and God would allow them to return to their land and I love the poetic language he uses.

'The days are surely coming, says Yahweh, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals.' (Jeremiah 31:27)

According to Jeremiah, God would build them up again from the very beginning, a re-colonisation that would grow over time.

Seeding a land with people and animals is also the story of our land where Pacific mariners arrived in canoes to live in these forested islands. They were later joined by people and animals from the other side of the globe. Both those people seeds brought animal seeds such as rabbits, rodents and possums that radically changed the landscape and were, and still are, a threat to other species.

It is the same story as a small group crossing the land bridge from what is now Russia to Alaska and into the American Continent. Contemporary thinking is that was some twelve thousand years ago for a relatively small group of nomads. People seed for a great continent.

In Jeremiah's understanding, the Assyrian invasion could only happen if Yahweh allowed it.

⁵ <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost22.htm>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_you_live_in_interesting_times

They had a covenant relationship with Yahweh to protect them so that covenant must have been broken. God is always just and holy and can't break agreements. So, it must have been the people of Israel and Judah that broke the covenant.

They didn't have a Waitangi Tribunal in Jeremiah's time and place. Therefore, Jeremiah imagined that Yahweh would have to make a new covenant.

The covenant with Moses was based on a set of rules carved in stone but Yahweh would put the divine law within the people and write it on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33).

That is where Jeremiah's imagination is truly inspired. The problem with any written law, carved in stone or filed in a computer, is that it affirms bad behaviour if that behaviour is not specifically forbidden.

To counteract that, our road rules are extremely detailed and many of us think they are so detailed they become a nuisance. Nevertheless, it is possible to damage life and property without breaching the road code. That's when you discover that overarching statute that demands that you drive with due care and attention.

But it is the overarching law written in our hearts that allows us to live in community.

We can read in the Bible that we have to love our neighbour, but the lawyer in Luke's Gospel wanted to know who his neighbour was (Luke 10:29).

Jesus didn't answer the 'who is my neighbour' question. He told the lawyer a story about being a neighbour (Luke 10:30-37).

That story illustrates a most important part of the divine law written in our hearts - 'empathy.'

Empathy should suggest that it is not being a good neighbour to set a lethal trap for the cat next door to stop it killing the birds at your bird feeding table. Rather, it would be best to put the bird feeder where the cat can't get it.

Empathy is about seeing other people as ourselves and imagining how we would feel if someone hurt or cheated us.

It is the purpose of religion to build empathy in humanity. But empathy is hard to define. That is why Jesus told stories. Jesus told stories because he wanted people to feel situations, to relate to situations and imagine themselves in situations.

Empathy tells us that there are times when we just have to remember that our mother told us that sticks and stones will break our bones, but names will never hurt us.

We don't know what the issue of justice was that drove the woman to the unjust judge, but that does not matter. What matters is that the divine law written in our heart, is continually refreshed and rebooted by our faith tradition. Faith upgrades tell us that empathy reminds us of the young people who are driven to suicide by bullying, both verbal and physical.

Persistent prayer in such circumstances might seem the only answer. But God is not the unjust judge that needs to be pestered. Jesus makes that clear. 'And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?' (Luke 18:7)

We need to remember that prayer is about taking our concerns to God and in so doing reminding ourselves what is important to us.

Prayer is about acknowledging the presence of God, reminding ourselves of the presence of God, being aware that the God we image in Christ is always with us. We are human and we need reminding that we should be taking action as well as praying.

Being reminded of God's presence draws our attention to the laws God has written in our hearts and sometimes those laws conflict with injustice around us. That is when we come up against the unjust judge. The unjust judge is the way our community exploits the vulnerable. The divine law reminds us of the way we so easily divide ourselves into 'them' and 'us'. That is the attitude that allows American police to shoot black suspects. More importantly, it is attitude that automatically identifies people of colour as suspects and that is not unique to the United States. Some time ago I read a comment from a young pacific woman who took one of her children to the afterhours surgery. The receptionist looked up and said, 'It might be better if you went to the emergency department at the hospital which is free.' The woman rolled her eyes and thought 'Get over it lady, my salary is bigger than yours.'

Injustice in our world is the unjust judge and it takes persistence to change injustice that is ingrained into our society. But the divine law written in our hearts demands we persist.

Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, the Very Rev John Murray and John Minto all persisted and got justice. Kate Shepherd, Emily Pankhurst and many other women persisted and not only changed our world but opened it to further change. Emily Pankhurst was recorded as saying 'The argument of the broken windowpane is the most valuable argument in modern politics.'

That was a statement about what, in her time, was seen as undignified protest. But it affirmed protest as a political action that was far more effective than writing polite letters to MPs. Certainly, that sort of persistence may sound a bit excessive but if it got universal suffrage and keeps the planes of death on the ground in the Middle East and Ukraine, it remains part of political persistence today.

The big challenge in this story of the persistent widow is that the very persistent prayers that bring us close to God open us to the divine call to oppose the injustice in our world.

We should also note that the widow in Jesus' story was a symbol of poverty. Widows in Jesus' day were excluded from society and lived in absolute poverty and Luke was writing his gospel for the early church struggling to survive. That early church was metaphorically the widows of temple Judaism. This story reminded them of the freedom they had to win for others.

This story reminds us that it is often the marginalised people who are free to sit at the front of the bus, to chant 'I an't afraid of your jail cause I want my freedom.' Kris Kristofferson, in the song Me & Bobby McGee wrote 'Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose.'

Many oppressed people are in that position and the law written on our hearts calls us to empathise with them and be part of their persistence.

I will never forget anti-apartheid Presbyterian protester the Very Reverend John Murry's definition of a miracle. After he witnessed the first free elections in South Africa he told some of us:

"A miracle is when you believe something must happen, you work to make it happen, you pray it will happen. But you know it won't happen.

Then it happens!

That's a miracle."

We are all called by the divine law written in our hearts to walk the discipleship road and embrace the freedom of the crucified Christ.

That's when we live in interesting times,
and that's when miracles happen.