

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

29th October 2023 – Celebration of the Reformation

Jeremiah 31:31-34

RE-FORMED

Sometimes it's hard to let go of the old, and to take on the new. Would you agree with that? Can you think of any areas in your life where that has been, or is, the case? I think this is probably true for all of us, to varying degrees, in at least some areas of our life. Even for those who see themselves as great embracers of change I'm going to suggest that there are still areas of their life which they like to remain the same, to know that this place, or person, or food or drink, or event, will be the same as they always have been. And why do we feel like this? Again, many and varied reasons for each of us. The old keeps us connected with the people, the memories, the feelings, the accomplishments, of the past, and we aren't always comfortable breaking that connection. The old also is what is tried, and true, and tested, and to change it is to take on something which may be better, but could be worse. The old can be our 'safe place', it's what we know. New is good, and many times when I have been reluctant to try something new I am thankful that either I have somehow taken that plunge, or had people in my life who have pushed me towards it, and being pleasantly surprised that while the old was good, the new can be even better.

Sometimes it's hard to let go of the old, and to take on the new. These are the words which came to me when I first read this reading from Jeremiah this week, the Old Testament reading for Reformation Day. In the middle of this reading Jeremiah says, 'Here is the new agreement that I, the LORD, will make with the people of Israel' (33a). Another way to translate 'agreement' is 'covenant'. We still use the term covenant today as a legal term for a binding agreement between two parties, and as a word to describe the relationship between God and His people it describes what God will do and what His people will do. God made a covenant with Noah when He said He wouldn't send another flood, with Abraham when circumcision became the sign the Israelites were God's people, with Moses when He gave him the Ten Commandments, and with King David when He promised a King would come from his family. A covenant laid down like that is clear; it has clear rules, regulations, penalties. A covenant like those God gave His

people in the Old Testament sets things out literally in stone, or in black and white. They aren't easy to keep, plenty of stories in the Old Testament show that to be true, but at least you know where you stand.

Perhaps it's because even though this covenant might not be doable, at least it's understandable, that when the time came for what Jeremiah says here to become true, when Jesus was born, many of those who were waiting for this Messiah, this Saviour, couldn't accept Him; they couldn't leave behind the old and take on the new. Jesus came talking about love, forgiveness, paying the price for our sins; being loved and forgiven by God first and then what we do being a response to that, not the reason for it. And that wasn't easy for people to accept. The old way of the keeping the Law wasn't working, that's why God brought in a new way, but it was hard to move away from what had been known for so long.

And when you challenge the old, and say it should be replaced by the new, that's not always well received. Even though the Christian Church was founded on the new covenant between God and His people which is based on our forgiveness through Jesus' dying and rising again, by 1500 years later the Church was back to teaching it was all about the Law coming to us from the outside, and us responding to that or else, God help us, we were in trouble. A young monk called Martin Luther was one person who challenged that. Luther became a monk after making a pledge to God during a thunderstorm, and because of His intelligence moved up to become a priest, and then a doctor and teacher of theology. But when Luther finally got his hands on a Bible (they were all handwritten back then), He discovered that what the Church was teaching about God's love for us, that it is based on the Law, and even that people could pay money for God to forgive them or their family members a bit quicker, that this was completely wrong. The new covenant which Jeremiah foretold, which Jesus brought in, which the New Testament teaches, is about God loving and forgiving us, and then with this love and law on our hearts and minds, our responding to this because of what He has already done in and for us. In Jesus the old is gone, God promises, and the new way is now here. The old covenant saw God's people frequently go away from Him, through Jesus the new way is designed to keep us close to Him.

When we look at the Reformation, we normally focus on the change it brought about in the Church, bringing about that refocusing on the truth of God's love, as well as the change in brought about in politics, society, and even technology at least in the Western World. And that's all good, but in the light of how we

are looking at the message of this Jeremiah reading today, I want to have a different focus, and that's to focus on what this message brings about in the re-formation of us. This is illustrated very well by Martin's Luther's famous 'Luther's Rose'. When we look at that symbol, what do we see right in the centre of it? The cross laid within the heart. Now, I've got no idea whether or not Luther was thinking of Jeremiah 31:33 when he came up with this design, but it seems to fit so well with what we read here; 'Here is the new agreement that I, the LORD, will make with the people of Israel: "I will write my laws on their hearts and minds. I will be their God, and they will be my people."' (33) The law, the new covenant, which is what Jesus has done for us, represented for us here by the cross, is written in our hearts. And from there comes out everything else Luther's Rose symbolises; the white to symbolise purity, the green for new life, the blue for the joy of heaven, and the golden ring around it to symbolise how precious this all is for us and how it lasts for ever. A great illustration that our re-formation starts from the inside, from faith in Jesus in our hearts, and then works out to what we receive and how we live in response to this. The ultimate purpose of the Reformation wasn't to reform the Church, that was just a way to re-form us, God's people, into who He helps us to be through Jesus.

What the Bible is teaching, and what was rediscovered and highlighted 500 years ago, is that God putting His love and forgiveness inside of us, in our hearts, is a much better way of us having a close relationship with Him than being burdened down by the old way of simply following God's Law. It leads to a real and loving relationship. It leads to us having a change of heart. It leads to us being re-formed as God's people.

What does this mean for us, then? It means that we have no doubt about God's love and forgiveness for us, because they rely on us in no way at all, but we simply receive them and all they mean through our faith. It means that we can rely on the promises of God in His Word, which speaks again and again of God's love for us and His promise that we are re-formed in Him. It means we can look to the promise made to us in our Baptism that we will always be God's children, and to the assurance of His love and sacrifice for us as we receive Holy Communion that our sins are forgiven and we have been brought back to Him. It means that the Holy Spirit works in us so that through these things God is always re-forming us, from the inside out.

If we are re-formed on the inside, what does that look like on the outside? That is, perhaps quite simply, to live out God's love in our lives. To put worshipping and following God at the centre, the foundation, the *heart*, of all we do. As those who know God's forgiveness, who are assured of it, it is in turn to forgive others, as well as to accept, support, encourage them. It is to be God's people, God's hands, in this world, showing and teaching people about His love, but also to be sharing what He has given us with those in need, speaking out for those who can't speak for themselves, standing up for those who can't protect themselves. To be re-formed from the inside by God's love, is to live out in all we do the new relationship He has now made with us.

Sometimes it is hard to let go of the old and take on the new, and that is often ok, the old can be very important too. But the new relationship God has made with His people which Jeremiah writes about here, which Jesus lived, died, and rose again to bring to us, and which Luther and others rediscovered and taught for us at the Reformation, that is a new relationship we need to take hold of and allow to grow in our hearts. God's promise is that as He writes this new law, the law of forgiveness in Jesus, on our hearts and in our minds that He will be our God and we will be His people. Through His love in Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit, not only the Church but each of us are now re-formed by Him, from the inside out, each day. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Is there any area of your life, or anything in your life, in which you don't like change? Has there ever been anything which you haven't wanted to change, but were then pleasantly at how much better the new way was than the old?
- Think about God's old agreement, or covenant, with His people. What is it like to just live under rules all the time, and to know that if you don't keep them perfectly, which you can't, you will be punished? Does this lead to a good relationship?
- Think about God's new agreement, or covenant, with His people. How is it different for us when God's love and forgiveness is where our relationship with Him starts, and our responding comes from there? How does this truth, rediscovered in the Reformation, change both our relationship with God and our lives?

Pray: thank God for the new covenant of love and forgiveness which He has now written on our hearts. Pray that as we are re-formed from the inside this will now come out as we live our lives for Him.

Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
29.10.23