

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

1<sup>st</sup> November 2020 – Reformation Day

**JEREMIAH 31:31-34**

**INNER GRACE**

We have just had an election here in Queensland; I'm sure even those of you who live in New South Wales haven't been able to miss that. And of course, the big issue for this election has been, as it is everywhere, dealing with the effects of the COVID pandemic; border closures, economic recovery, restrictions on what we can and can't do, etc. But there are issues which still come up in every election, and one of those is: Law and Order. There will always, sadly, be people doing the wrong thing and breaking laws, and there will also always be those who suffer because of the wrong actions of others. Every election the major parties roll out their policies on how they will deal with this. Some take the stance of stricter laws, harsher penalties, more police on the street; a forceful approach which will make people do what is right and be too afraid to do what is wrong. Others take a seemingly opposite view of working to change the wrong doer themselves and getting them to choose to make the right decisions through means like restorative justice, diversion programs, community involvement, better education and welfare programs, more positive relationships between police and communities; an approach which focuses on changing people's attitudes to themselves and others and so leading them to willingly change. Without wanting to get into a debate about this right now, the answer, as it often is, is probably somewhere in the middle of these two approaches.

What about for us, how does it work best? Being forced to change by someone else, or choosing to change ourselves because of what is inside of us? This kind of tension also comes up many times in the Bible when it comes to God's relationship with His people.

It's exactly that kind of thinking, the motivation for change working from the inside or the outside, which Jeremiah is talking about in this Bible reading. God had had a number of agreements, or 'covenants' is a better word, with His people in the Old Testament, but they hadn't worked. They included things like the Ten Commandments, and they were about how God would look after and

care for the people, and His people in response would follow and worship Him. God kept His part of the bargain, but again and again the people broke theirs.

So now, God says to the people through Jeremiah, there will be a new covenant, not written on stone but on your hearts, on the inside. 'I will be your God, and you will always know that and you will be my people. You will know me because I love you and forgive you'. This new covenant or agreement Jeremiah spoke about was pointing forward to the hope, the promise, of Jesus coming as the Saviour for God's people. It was saying to God's people; no longer do you have to follow me out of fear of punishment and hope for reward, but now you can follow me out of love and thanks for what you have already been given. Now they will have a real relationship with God because of the Inner Grace which comes out in their lives.

Five hundred and three years ago, so thousands of years after Jeremiah said these words, and around fifteen hundred years after Jesus lived on earth, a man called Martin Luther went through the same kind of struggles that Jeremiah went through. Even though God had promised this new covenant of love and forgiveness, and even though Jesus had come to live, die, and rise again to make it a reality, God's people, because of who we are, had changed it back again. Instead of believing in God's love and grace living in us and changing us from the inside out, God's people had gone back to looking at rules and telling themselves and each other how they *had* to now live. So, Luther, like every one of his time, grew up with a vision of God as a harsh and angry judge, a God who had to be pleased or else there would be big punishments. The church of his time took it even further and had a good money-making scheme going by telling people they could buy God's approval for themselves and their family. The message of Jeremiah, the message of Jesus, the message of the Bible, had been forgotten.

Luther was a very clever man, and when he became a priest and a doctor in theology at the age of 21, and finally got to read the Bible for himself, he rediscovered the God of love and forgiveness who Jeremiah talks about in our reading. And in 1517 when Luther nailed to the door of his local church a list of 95 things he believed the Church was teaching which were wrong, he started

a movement of change which not only saw the birth of our own Lutheran Church and many other churches, but also eventually led to change in the Catholic church itself, and indeed had a huge influence on western society as a whole, some of which changes, like education for everyone, still exist today.

We can sum up what Luther came up with in three short statements: The Bible alone, Faith alone, and grace alone. The Bible is the basis for all the truth we know about God. We are saved because we believe in Jesus as our Saviour, not because of anything we ourselves have done or can do. And we are saved because God loves us and gives us our forgiveness as a free gift through Jesus, what we now call 'grace'. A long time before this Jeremiah had spoken about this forgiveness and life as a hope in God's promise that one day it would happen. Now Luther was talking about it as something which had happened through Jesus, but people had forgotten it! For both, they knew that God's plan was that by knowing His love and forgiveness we would be changed from the inside, instead of getting weighed down and worrying about the rules forcing us to change from the outside. The message of both is that our faith begins and grows in our hearts, and then comes out in our lives. When have God's love and grace inside of us, written on our hearts, this will then come out in the lives we live for God.

Even though this change is now from the inside it's still not always easy, is it? We still sometimes want to go and do it our own way. There's lots of stuff inside of us like selfishness, greed, pride and anger, and lots of stuff outside of us like different temptations, which cause to want to go our own way instead.

God knows it's hard, that's why He sent Jesus to forgive us. He knows we can't do it by ourselves, that's why He's given the Holy Spirit to remind us about His love and forgiveness through our Baptism, through Holy Communion, through reading and hearing the Bible. All these things point to those great truths which the Bible talks about and which Martin Luther rediscovered; that God forgives us so that now we can freely live as His people. Having been forgiven, living our lives following God now follows on from that. So, in the words of Martin Luther, what does this mean for

us? It means now that we don't try to follow God because we must. It means we don't try to obey God because we should. It means we love and follow God because we can. It means that you can know that God loves each one of you so much that He has done everything needed for you to be able to stay close to Him.

The message of Jeremiah all those years ago was that God was going to make a new covenant with His people; one based not on strict rules and harsh punishments but on them knowing His love and forgiveness in their hearts. In Jesus God made this message come true. For a long time, Christians lost this message, until people like Martin Luther rediscovered it in the Bible and taught us again what it means to have God's grace and forgiveness inside of us. Inner grace means inner peace, inner hope, inner certainty, because it means that we know God's love and forgiveness will be with us always. That's the message of Jeremiah's prophecy, the message rediscovered in the Reformation, and, thank God, the message we live in as God's people today. Amen.

### **TO FURTHER DISCUSS/REFLECT ON:**

#### **We Are Saved Only By God's Grace**

There is no way that we, as people, can come to God except for the free gift of forgiveness which was earned for us by Jesus dying and rising for us.

- What does it mean that Jesus willingly died for you? Is it easy for us to fully comprehend this kind of love?
- Jesus died so that we can have forgiveness from God and new life. What kind of response can you now make to this great love?

#### **The Bible Alone**

Another great truth Martin Luther pushed is that the Bible is the final source of truth about God. Not only did he translate the Bible into German, the language of his people, but this was at the same time that the printing press was invented so more Bibles could be copied off and distributed to people.

- What, for you, are the great truths which you have discovered in the Bible?
- Do you have any favourite Bible stories, or verses?
- Are there particular sections of the Bible which give you comfort or strength when you need it?

#### **Inner Grace**

- Reflect on, or share, what it means to have God's grace in your life?
- How would our lives, and our relationship with God, be different if we had to earn His love? Is this even possible?
- Give thanks to God for His grace, revealed in the Bible and rediscovered in the Reformation. Ask for His strength and guidance to live as someone who has this grace in your heart.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler  
1.11.2020*