

Sept 15 2013, Whitehorse United

Jeremiah 4:11-12, Psalm 14 VU p735, 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

What Is the Question?

Today's Hebrew readings are rather depressing.

Do you ever have moments, or days or longer, when you wonder why you bother carrying on? That whatever you do and however hard you try it's just not going to work? It's all hopeless, what's the use?

Many of the Bible writers had times like that, and they tell us that God does too. One can imagine God looking at the earth with head in hands and asking "Why did I ever start this?"

Psalmist says: (Ps 14:2, 3)

"God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.

They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupted; there is no one who does good, no, not one."

Jeremiah is not a happy camper either. "They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good." (Jeremiah 4:22)

Both their expectation is that God will destroy the people and start afresh.

The New Testament writers see very much the same problem but have a different take on it. Paul, writing to his friend and protégé Timothy, cheerfully acknowledges that he himself once persecuted the early believers and calls himself the chief of sinners.

But as Luther said, so what? It's one of the most quoted Bible verses – "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." (1 Timothy 1:15)

However you understand sin and salvation, and there are many ways to understand it, the message is that God in Jesus acts to restore us.

The Gospel shows Jesus at his story-telling best. The scene is that once again Jesus is attracting a crowd. Not a crowd of academics who can discuss theology and quote scripture, but a crowd of ordinary folk. Including some people who would be considered unacceptable.

The phrase “tax collectors and sinners” or “publicans and sinners” is a catchall phrase the Gospel writers use for people who are Jewish by nationality but not very observant religiously. “Tax collectors” are specifically men whom the occupying Roman authorities employed to collect the taxes they levied on the local people. Not a popular job.

So that’s some of Jesus’ audience. People who would not darken the door of the temple, nor be welcome if they did. Plus some of those temple officials. And a bunch of other folk. And Jesus tells them the well-known stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

It's good news. God as the shepherd looking for the missing sheep – have you noticed how in Joy’s lovely banner it’s not always the same sheep who goes missing? God as a woman, searching and searching for her precious lost coin.

God is the one who seeks us. God not waiting with folded arms until we crawl back and apologise - God actively looking for us, searching us out, trying to bring us home.

“There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Sin is not a popular topic. The Christian church through the ages has rather overdone the guilt understanding. It's a perfectly valid understanding but only one of the ways of understanding.

And a big caveat here - I am no theologian, this is a question that much cleverer people than me have wrestled with over the centuries. So if what I say makes no sense to you, don't worry about it. Just smile and say that Sheila's way off base today and that's OK too.

I love the peanuts cartoon showing Linus holding a big sign, "Christ is the Answer". Snoopy holds another sign, "What was the question?"

So what is the question that Jesus is the answer to?

Seems to me that the question is, what went wrong and how can it be fixed?

Seems to me that we are mostly pretty lucky here. We have enough to eat, there are no bombs falling on Main St, the lights are on, if we get sick there are free doctors and nurses, we can openly say we are Christians without worrying about being attacked.

And yet - and yet.

Just open the newspaper and we see accounts of violence and war and disasters. Walk round our town and we see homelessness and poverty. Look around this congregation and we see illness and pain and grief. Look inside ourselves and we see our own individual problems and sorrows and struggles and imperfections.

And something deep inside says this is not how it was supposed to be. Something has gone wrong - with our society, with ourselves, with creation itself. And Christianity claims that somehow God is acting in Jesus to fix it.

We may experience that wrongness in many ways.

Sometimes we experience that wrongness as loneliness, as feeling we are abandoned. You know that old fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel – it's horrible. The idea of a father deliberately abandoning his children in the forest - brrrr. But it resonates with our deepest fears.

That's when we can turn to God who searches for us, walks beside us, welcomes us home. Our own creed repeats "we are not alone."

Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus promising "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt 28:20)

Sometimes we experience that wrongness as the basic injustice of society. We see war, we see violence, we see poverty, we see suffering, we see death. It's just not right.

That's when we can turn to Jesus the healer, Jesus who condemned hypocrisy, Jesus and all the prophets calling for justice, for peace, for a

new way of living. (sheep and goats – Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus who was not defeated even by death.

Sometimes we experience that wrongness as the feeling of being empty, invisible, of no account whatsoever. No-one cares, no-one understands, no-one even notices me.

That's when we can turn to Jesus who loves me – as the old hymn says, Jesus loves even me. Jesus said “Even the hairs of your head are all numbered” (Luke 12:7).

Sometimes we experience that wrongness as condemnation, as guilt. We are only too well aware of our failings and it seems that try as we may we can never overcome them. We can never be good enough.

That's when we can turn to Jesus who offers free and undeserved forgiveness. Yes, we are unacceptable, but God accepts us anyway. Jesus said “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Sometimes we experience that wrongness as hopelessness. Life is tough. The odds are forever stacked against us. And nothing will ever change.

That's when we can turn to Jesus who suffered too. Jesus who promised “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.” (Matt 11:28)

There are many ways of understanding, of experiencing, what has gone wrong with this life as we live it. But in all of it we can always turn to Jesus. And in the good times too, let's not forget about that.

I don't presume to understand it. Far less to tell you how to understand it. But I do trust that Jesus will be there for you in the ways that you need.

God go with you. Amen.

Hymn: VU 278 In The Quiet Curve of Evening

(1240)