25th March 2012

**Jeremiah 31:31–34**

This time last week one of the main news stories was of the collapse due to a cardiac arrest of a Premier League footballer. Fabrice Muamba collapsed during the FA Cup match between Tottenham and Bolton. His heart had stopped and medics rushed on to the pitch to give him treatment. The rest of the players stood around looking distraught and the thirty thousand crowd looked on in anguish. The match was abandoned as Muamba was rushed to hospital, his heart still not able to beat on its own, which apparently would be the case for about eighty minutes. Football matches the next day were given a new perspective and many players wore special shirts asking the public to pray for Muamba. His fiancée urged people to keep praying for him – she believed it would make a difference and that ultimately God is in control. The headline of the Sun newspaper on Monday was those four words – God is in control. The Daily Mail had the front page headline ‘In God’s Hands’

I thought Lord this is a big high profile case – any chance of a good result?

Remarkably Muamba by Monday evening was breathing unaided and able to recognise family and friends and have conversation.

London chest hospital consultant cardiologist Dr Andrew Deaner said Fabrice Muamba's recovery has been "miraculous". He said it was "very unusual" to see a recovery like Muamba's.

One wonders whether those who did pray for Muamba may now thank God and maybe continue their new life of prayer- reaching out for a new relationship with God. Or whether they will revert to the type of person who has time for God in crisis but then ignores God for the rest of life?

A lady called Gracie called in a repairman to fix her electric clock. The repairman fiddled with it for a while and then said, "There's nothing wrong with the clock; you didn't have it plugged in." Gracie replied, "I don't want to waste electricity, so I only plug it in when I want to know what time it is."   
  
That's an apt description of many of us. We save our religion for a rainy day. We go about unplugged and wonder why our lives are so devoid of power. How sad. Christian faith is not something to be plugged in when it is convenient or when it is necessary. The Christian life is lived daily. There is a cost involved.

Will they have a change of heart?

As is the nature of prayer and the life of faith, one will never know for certain whether prayer made a result. The atheist will scoff at such superstitious and nonsensical behaviour and look for a rational answer. The believer will look for confirmation of their faith. Those whose loved ones have died of cardiac arrests will wonder why not them? A former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, was once challenged that answers to prayer where merely a coincidence. He said that may be so; however I have found that the more I pray the more those coincidences seem to happen.

Tis mystery all, and only from the other side of eternity will we truly know. Muamba’s fiancée certainly had good theology, certainly from a Reformed standpoint – whatever happens, God is ultimately in control. That is our hope, even the worst things that happen – are not lost in the redemptive purposes of God. God can turn to good all things, with those who work with him.

Muamba meanwhile has in a sense been born again – a kind of resurrection to new life, with a new heart!

Jeremiah talks about a metaphorical new heart in the passage for today. The prophet speaks of a covenant not of stone, not external, but written deep inside, on the very hearts of the people.   
Jeremiah speaks of God's promises to the people of Israel while they are still in captivity, still in exile, steeped in loss and grief that have broken their hearts and their spirits, too. Their city has been destroyed and their conqueror Babylon has carried away their leaders to the far-off capital of its powerful empire. By this 31st chapter, Jeremiah is no longer scolding the people for their sin and their lack of faithfulness to God. Instead, Jeremiah brings the people a new message from God. God is trying to tell them something, Jeremiah says, and it's good news, a word of comfort and hope. God has had compassion on the people; God's heart has been touched by their suffering, and God forgives them.  
  
In this time of exile God makes sweeping promises to the people of Israel, promises of restoration and return and, most importantly, of relationship, too. Once again, as in so many covenant stories before this one, God promises to be in relationship with the people - like God's promises to Noah, to Abraham and Sarah, and to Moses and the people at Sinai - God promises to be a presence with the people, abiding with them, and promises that they will even belong to each other: God says, I will be your God, and you…you will be my people.  
  
Even though they have broken the covenant God made with them back there in the desert, at Sinai with the Ten Commandments, even though things are perhaps the worst they've ever been, God is using words like "new" and "heart" and "covenant" once again.

The great scholar of the Old Testament, Walter Brueggemann, often writes of the "core memory" of Israel about God: that God will do today, in this bad circumstance, what God has done in the past: "new creation, new covenant, new kingship, new exodus, new land distribution." God doesn't do these things merely out of some kind of stubborn faithfulness but out of deep, wounded love and profound grief that have moved God beyond anger to tender caring and, most importantly, to forgiveness (Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy). It's a thing of the heart, in this text: God decides this time that torah, the law, will be written not on stones, on something external, but inside, deep inside the people, written on their hearts.  
  
This doesn't mean that the relationship is simply one of feeling because it is written on the heart. It seems that our understanding of "heart" is too narrow: here we are speaking of a core experience and core identity, not just a feeling. And at that core is forgiveness. The people of Israel have the chance to begin again, Brueggemann says: "Israel is now completely unburdened by its past" (An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible).

I am still writing my latest essay on Children’s spirituality! Of course there is always a tension between giving children rules about what they ‘have to do ‘and discovering the joy when children of their own volition ‘want to do’ something. Christian theology has been a bit chequered in the past about our attitude to children. A legacy of a belief in original sin can see children as in the dark spiritually, and needing enlightenment. Religious instruction, teaching them the faith is a way to redeem them, convert them.

Yet of course Jesus loved children, said to his disciples we had to become like them, and said that the kingdom of God belongs to them. In other words Jesus affirmed their spiritual openness and state and valued their experience of God. Many children have a heart for God, heart that is open to wonder, and awe, a seeking nature, wanting to know more about God, trusting and delighting in all things. Often we as adults can squeeze it out of children because they don’t have the language to describe their experiences or we correct them in their understanding, or just don’t listen to them, or pick up on their feelings and experience.

I remember when I was around the age,5 or 6 I believed that I had an inner mouse running around inside me that I would talk to and think through what I was doing and feeling. I told my Dad about ‘mousey’ and he looked at me as though I was a bit funny and needed the doctor. He said ‘don’t be daft’. So I never talked about him again. I guess looking back I was recognising the voice of conscience, the presence of God, the Other, in my life, yet imagined it in terms I could understand. Sadly I wasn’t encouraged to value that experience.

Jeremiah's words invite us to think about who God is. None of our words, or anyone else's, and that means none of the words in the Bible, either – no human words can adequately describe God. We fall short every time, but we give it a try anyway. There's a thought-provoking translation question in verse 32, when either "husband" or "master" could be used, as in "a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband" or "though I was their master." The REB says ‘though I was patient with them’. There have been many times in human history where the distinction between the two, husband and master, has not been great, but most of us resist equating the two. In any case, neither word defines or adequately describes God.  
  
It seems to me that the overall feeling of this part of the Book of Jeremiah, the Book of Consolation as these chapters are called, is about God as a parent. As a parent (and former child/teenager) myself, I can really relate to how frustrated God must have felt when the people kept messing up. I also understand the whole thing about God being really mad and then being moved suddenly and deeply to love and compassion when God remembers how much God loves the people. If you have been reading the Bible in a year – we are in Numbers at the moment and there is a real tussle between the grumblings of the Israelites and then God getting fed up with them and Moses saying but they are your people, you still need to love them….

It's often said that we contrast the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New, with the former being harsh and punishing and angry, and the latter being a much "kinder and gentler" God. And yet, we've just established in this text (as in many others) that God has great love and compassion for the people of Israel.

Walter Brueggemann says that the core testimony in the Old Testament about God's love and faithfulness is in tension with a "counter-testimony" of Israel's abandonment, exile, loss, and suffering, suffering that they attribute to God's judgment on them.   
  
Brueggemann observes that the core testimony, about God's love and mercy, and the counter-testimony, about abandonment and judgment, are in both the Old and the New Testaments. The faith of Israel and the Easter affirmation of the church, he says, are both grounded in the belief that the God who judges is the God who brings home to wellbeing.

We know about Good Friday and the cross, about sorrow and death. All humankind knows about suffering, brutality, and injustice, about tragic endings, about death, all of which are part of the human condition, in our private lives and in the life of the world. We Christians also know about Easter Sunday and the promise, the hint of resurrection for the rest of us, because Jesus is risen from the dead. This Sunday experience is all about hope.  
  
However, our lives are not all about Good Friday or all about Easter Sunday. We know suffering and abandonment, exile and loss, and we face death, our own and the deaths of those we love. We know ourselves as sinners, and our lives as broken. And we also taste forgiveness, we taste hope, and we taste new life, we catch sight of it here and there, get word of it, listen and wait and hope...we remember that we are dust, and to dust we shall return, and yet we know ourselves also as bound for glory...pain and hope, dying and rising again...all humankind waiting, waiting, here in the unresolved, waiting...and we understand a little more why faith is best described as trust.  
  
And so we turn again to God, the God of both the Old Testament and the New, with our broken spirits and our sins, our homesickness and loneliness, our hunger for justice for a suffering world, our lost vision and lost hope, the very fabric of our hearts torn open, and we listen for God to address us with words of comfort and consolation, words of rescue and release, of restoration and homecoming.

God offers the people of Israel a new covenant.

Eric Erikson looked at human development and saw it as a series of emotional conflicts that shape our life, our heart. Starting with infancy, we have a vulnerable dependency on other people. The conflict is between trust or mistrust. I’m dependent on others, can I trust them. Depending on how this stage is resolved may determine whether you become a more hopeful person or you withdraw. As a toddler you pass through a period of tentative self-control and independence. Can you seize control in some areas - .is your independence met with encouragement, even when your efforts miss the mark. The major emotional conflict here is between autonomy or shame and doubt. It can make you a compulsive person – you have to do something right – or someone who has a certain freedom and self will. Can you take initiative or will you feel guilty?

Our development, according to Erikson, depends on how these conflicts are resolved. Positive resolution strengthens us for the on-going journey through life with new virtues at every stage: such as , hope, will, purpose, love and so on. Unfavourable resolutions may scar the personality – withdrawal, compulsion, inhibition, for example.

The crucial feature of his theory is that it suggests many have had twisted growth. There may be personal work to do; facing up to the legacies of the past, so that religious and personal development can proceed in a good way. He is optimistic that change can take place. He sees God’s grace as providing that difference to help people know the security of love and forgiveness in order to make changes necessary, to seek a new heart. He values the role of prayer – relating to God as the perfect parent, the one who knows us fully and loves us totally, and how that relationship of prayer, that inner dynamic, can release us and heal us. He suggests positive forms of church fellowship can restore many virtues as the Holy Spirit is at work. In other words, Erikson is hopeful of redemption, of God creating a new heart in indivudlas.

As you may know I am the chaplain at Durlsey police Station and I was talking this week with one of the sergeants down there about a scheme they are running in the next few weeks to try and try and divert some young offenders from a future life of crime.

The youth empowerment crime diversion scheme was set up by Jackie Malton and Graham Godden They used to hate each other. Detective Chief Inspector Jackie Malton of the Flying Squad, was the thief-taking, go-getting, hard-drinking real-life role model for DCI Jane Tennison of the television series Prime Suspect used to hate all armed robbers. And Graham Godden, once "Britain's most wanted robber", the "M25 Bandit" and a reckless heroin addict, used to hate all coppers.

Malton was a recovering alcoholic who went to talk to offenders in prison about getting over addiction. Godden was an aggressive man and a heroin addict. He said everyone who tried to correct my behavior was always someone in authority, which I reacted really badly to." But I could identify with Malton.

The scheme takes ex –offenders and lets them talk to youth offender to share experience and try to persuade them to seek a different life, to have a change of heart. It is one of the most effective schemes around at the moment – with a 40% success rate. Do pray for the police in this work with young people, who often have had difficult upbringings and now need a new start, a new heart.

I did say to the sergeant that people also need a new sense of direction and purpose to help them carry on. It needs a new on-going relationship as well as a new start.

In the book *Unfinished Business*, Halford Luccock told a story of the little town of Flagstaff, Maine. The town was to be flooded as part of a large lake for which a dam was being built. All improvements and repairs in the whole town were stopped. What was the use of painting a house if it was to be covered with water in six months? Why repair anything when the whole village was to be wiped out? So, week by week, the whole town became more and more bedraggled, more gone to seed, more woebegone. Then Luccock added by way of explanation, “Where there is no faith in the future, there is no power in the present.”

Jeremiah says I shall be their God, they shall be my people – it’s an on-going relationship that will ultimately be life changing.

There was a very powerful testimony in the URC’s reform magazine this month of a divorcee overcoming bitterness between her and her estranged partner. She had lived through that stage in her marriage where they had been together because they wanted to be together , to then having to be together. When a relationship gets to the stage that all that is keeping you together is a sense of ‘duty’ - we have to stay together – rather than ‘we want to stay together - then life becomes very strained.

The writer confessed that she was no saint. She wrote ‘There are times when I am deeply frustrated by my ex-husbands behaviour towards our daughter and I could get on my high horse about how unfair I feel the division of responsibility has sometimes been.’

She came back to the story of Solomon who had to decide which mother should have the baby they both disputed the ownership of. He said cut the baby in two and give half to each mother. But the true mother said no and begged to give the whole child to the other mother. Solomon recognises the plea as that of a real mother.

The writer of this article said she had a change of heart and recognised that no matter how unjust she felt, she didn’t want to divide her child. She said that ‘when the pain of seeing her adore her father is almost too much for me to bear, I remind myself that it cannot be right for me to want to divide my living child’.

She pleads for a compassionate and understanding heart from the church to those who parent apart or in blended families.

When it is easy to give up on human goodness – when the wrong seems beyond remedy – today’s readings remind us of the true power of grace. God transforms reality, even the dark recesses of the human heart. In that transformation is a hope that can re-create our world.

I like the story of an unusual account of how the news of the Battle of Waterloo reached England. The report from the battle ground back in those days was first carried by sailing ship to the southern coast and then by signal flags to London. And when the report was received at Winchester, the flags on the cathedral began to spell out the message, "Wellington defeated." And then before the message could be completed, a heavy fog rolled in and with that heavy fog the gloom of a nation filled the hearts of the people. But then, when the mist began to lift, it became evident that the signals of the Winchester Cathedral had really spelled out this triumphant message. "Wellington defeated the enemy!" Too often we allow the future to be colored by what we understand at the moment and it keeps us from moving forward.

Trust God in the midst of transition and conflict. Let go of resistance to change. Let go of panic, release yourself again into His hands. God is for you and God will see you through. Trust in him. He is our redeemer.

He can give us a new heart.