

The Law Written On Our Hearts Pentecost Vigil 2009

They're so many wonderful readings to choose from in this evening's Pentecost Vigil that it is hard to know which one to focus on. Still, looking hard at this storehouse of riches I have decided to zero in on the Jeremiah reading about the law written on our hearts – the new Spirit inspired way of making the relationship of promises between God and his people come alive, so that the Covenant is no longer a dead letter.

Earlier on we heard in the Exodus reading about the awe-inspiring manner in which the law was given on Mt Sinai. These ten words from God become the centrepiece of Jewish religion. But as the prophets pointed out the people were reluctant to internalise the message, to give it more than lip service. The temptations of a false, self-serving, get my own needs met, style of religion are too great. It is this crisis of a poisoned religious culture in what is supposed to be the one living way of access to God available to the world that the prophets speak into. They are the lonely voices pointing out that military defeat, political collapse, and exile into what we would now call Iraq, will be the consequences of ignoring the radical call to holiness that the law embodies.

But as ever God has a proposal about how to make real religion come alive. The Spirit of God, if allowed entrance into believer's hearts, will give them a kind of inner moral compass that will assist an awakened conscience to decide and do the right thing in all the varieties of decisions and choices that daily life presents. This is a "Holy" Spirit after all – not just a Spirit that infuses magic power which human beings

can manipulate for their own ends. Indeed that is why the Spirit always has a will of the wisp, surprising, spontaneous dimension to its style of operations. It won't allow itself to become hijacked by any human agendas. And its purpose and goal is to make holy those whose lives it enters.

This is the heart of the prophet's religion – the call for the people of God to lift their game – to try for far, far more in their life with God, and with each other – to do and be much better people than they ever imagined they could be.

And that is what is odd, unique, surprising about the eruption of prophetic religion into the affairs of Israel. It must have been Divinely inspired because it asks so much of the people, it proposes an utterly different way of life than the internal agendas of the Jewish people would have come up with just then. It announces the disciplined search for holiness as the central business of the people of God. And it makes it clear that this will not just be the product of their own efforts, but rather a co-operative enterprise in which the Divine Spirit will lead and guide. The Holy Spirit will make a holy people holy.

We might note that Paul will develop this line of theological reasoning even further in his advice to the young churches of the Mediterranean basin, when he tells the new Christians in them that they don't need to keep the Jewish law because the Holy Spirit, at work within them since their baptism, will show them what to do, and how to behave. It will assist them in all the important decisions they must make, and will give them an inspired boldness in their style of Christian witness. Paul does assume at the same time that Christians have a basic code of morality, a rule book if you like, that has been

handed on to them in their formation process as believers. But he sees the crucial ingredient of Christian living as an awakened moral imagination that doesn't need to operate in a painting by numbers style of operation. What counts is a growing illumination, a developing power of insight, an enhanced capacity for intestinal fortitude that enables believers to stick to their guns in wise self-denying decisions. All of this is the work of the Spirit, that inner searchlight if you like that pierces the gloom of our inner confusion, and path finds our road into God.

The way this applies to us this evening is that the Anglican Church is by and large a routinized Christian community. It's tolerant, inclusive, way of doing things draws people in and accepts them on an as is where is basis. It continues to mirror Queen Elizabeth 1's way of trying to build the Church of England in the 16th century. As long as you turn up on Sunday and outwardly conform to the liturgical requirements of the Prayer book we wont make any searching enquiries into what you actually believe. That makes it possible to sail along in the internal life of the Anglican Church without letting the believing, behaving, belonging agendas of an alive Christianity infect you. Your Christian faith can become a kind of part time voluntary activity, a hobby interest – we enjoy the hymn singing, the beautiful liturgy, the numinous architecture, and the like-minded friends. All of this is good. I don't denigrate it. It's one of the reasons why I prefer to be an Anglican rather than other more intense styles of Christian community.

But it does mean that our Church, our membership needs a gee up from time to time, an outbreak of enthusiasm if you like, an occasional new holiness

movement that wakes our ideas up about just how rewarding an awakened style of Christian living can be. In that sense the law written on our hearts by the torch of the Spirit is something that needs to become a reality in every generation of the Anglican Church's life.

The prophet Jeremiah has something to say to us that has a never ending freshness about it, as it invites each person in the pews to find in their Christian faith an inspirational renewal of all that they are. The prophet Ezekiel put it in an even more striking way:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

One of the strongest drivers in human beings is to be fully alive, and they know full well about the inner deadness, and ambiguities, that prevent that happening. The pagan world around us thinks that a go for it, fulfil yourself to the max, agenda is the way to make all that happen for you. What Jeremiah and Ezekiel are saying to us this evening is that becoming holy in a way of life that involves saying no as well as yes to things that we most want is the road to becoming fully alive. For that to happen the Holy Spirit needs to inhabit us, to become the medium that we swim in, to indwell us. And the point is that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of the Son, that other way of being God that knows the human condition through and through, that loves us through and through, and that wants the very best for us.

