

## **MORNING SERVICE**

29 March 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

*5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent*

*Baptism*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)*

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### **Welcome & Intimations**

**Opening Hymn** : 'O love how deep' (CH 354 – *tune: Leipzig (Schein)*)

**Children's Talk**

**Children's Hymn** : 'All things bright and beautiful' (CH 137)

### **Prayer & Lord's Prayer**

**Readings** : Jeremiah 31:31-34 (*Good News Bible*) & John 12:20-26 (*New Jerusalem Bible*)

**Hymn** : 'Ride on' (CH 370)

### **Sermon**

The covenant is a controversial thing in church history, especially in Scotland. We have had full-blown wars including Covenanters. Where I come from the question whether or not you were included in the covenant could be the most important problem for a local community – since all would agree that none but one or two of them would eventually get there. So, perhaps it gives us some kind of relief to hear from the prophet Jeremiah that the people of Israel too had a difficult relation with the covenant.

Jeremiah says bold things. The old covenant has ceased to exist, he says, because of the infidelity of the people. God remained faithful, but Israel did not. This first covenant has become an empty will. The people have denied God's first love. Obviously the people have totally forgotten about the commandments which come with the covenant. That is the commitment to do justice, to make peace and to love God and one's neighbour. Instead they follow just anything their desires and emotions lead them to.

On behalf of the ONE, the God of Israel, Jeremiah announces a new covenant. Although God is the betrayed party, it is God who wants to renew the first covenant. It will be totally different, says the prophet: *written in the people's heart*. As if God says, 'You are mine and I am yours'. The heart – in the Bible that is where the human will is located. Instead of being led by their desires and emotions, the people will find a new commitment, a strong will to live along the way of the commandments.

Jeremiah speaks in the years shortly before the Babylonian exile of Juda. The ten northern tribes of Israel have already been taken into exile by the Assyrians, one-and-a-half century before. Jeremiah clearly sees where things are leading to: total defeat, imprisonment, destruction. Still he is certain about this new covenant to come.

To me the history of the Jewish people after the Babylonian exile down to our times has clearly shown they have learned what it is to have a new covenant *written in their hearts*. Surely they did not do it right the first time, and they are still learning now, but the truth of Jeremiah's prophecy seems obvious.

But what went wrong in the first place? Why could they continue to forget about the covenant God made with them through Moses on Mount Sinai?

René Girard<sup>1</sup> is a French philosopher who has spent most of his working life in the United States of America. His central thesis is that all human behaviour is ultimately driven by borrowed desire.<sup>2</sup> We are copycats. We cling to the conviction that our desires are original and really our own. For we are all unique, isn't it? But in reality, ever since humanity exists, we borrow our desires from others. We want what we think our heroes want. We want to be like them, with the same state of mind, the same house, car, partner, children etc. We think we are original, but in fact our life is mimicking others. And envy and jealousy are at the very heart of it.

That is probably why we like Jade Goody's<sup>3</sup> superdirect style, because she seems to confirm us in our conviction that we make our own original choices. But we also get angry when she really does make a choice of her own, and says or does the things our hero should not say. Meanwhile the tragedy is, that it is all a media-driven hype, a bubble that would have burst anyway. (From the same media I understand that Jade new that very well during her last year, and used it.)

If borrowed desires and mimicry are the basis of our behaviour, it can not surprise us that anger, conflict, violence and murder are also included in the package. This matches the Genesis stories we have read. Eve borrows her desire to become like God from the hissing snake. Cain wants to have God's attention like his brother Abel – and he murders him. The people in Noah's days ran wild after their competing desires.

We all want the same as someone else. Individuals as well as communities are torn apart by it. How to solve this fundamental conflict? Well, according to René Girard the most ancient solution is to scapegoat someone. This is essentially a religious ritual: a scapegoat gets sacrificed. It has proven to be a very effective method, although probably not the most disarable. The scapegoat is normally chosen in a random way, but always by a majority. Once he or she is dealt with anger and violence will have dissolved. Afterwards the victim can become more or less sacred. Thanks to this sacrifice peace was restored, isn't it?

To me Girard's theory seems very helpful. Mimicking and scapegoating surely are

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<sup>1</sup> A brief introduction to Girard's thinking can be found in the [Wikipedia](#). The book which is probably a good entry to Girard's own writings: René Girard, *Things Hidden Since The Foundation Of The World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) [transl. from: *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 1978)]. An interesting application of Girard's theory to more practical matters of life can be found in the work of [The Raven Foundation](#).

<sup>2</sup> His term is *mimesis*, which is the Greek noun μίμησις, meaning 'imitation' or 'counterfeit'.

<sup>3</sup> Jade Goody died at the age of 27 the day before I wrote this sermon.

most fundamental processes in human behaviour. This is how the people of Israel denied the covenant in the first place. They mimicked the people around them by worshipping other gods and not doing the justice the Torah requires. The prophets were the ones to confront them with it, and of course they were scapegoated for that. Jeremiah knew!

But God breaks down this perpetual process. God does not go into scapegoating, but instead offers a new covenant. It is written *in the heart*, the seat of people's own will. They do not have to run with their randomly borrowed desires and emotions. No, they can chose – to return to the unselfish love of God and to build their daily lives on that. In a way they lose. Meaning: they have to let go the things they *thought* were important, the things they *imagined* were worth living for. That is: the grand career, the big house, the perfect body, the everlasting youth. These things come as bonuses, but they are not essential.

Still, letting go these desires that have driven you for so many years, is difficult and painful. It feels like a serious loss to do so. In other times and other traditions fasting, for example over Lent, used to be a way to practice this letting go.

As John tells us, some Greek speaking Jews, strangers in Jerusalem, wish to see Jesus. It obviously is a deep wish and they approach their target cautiously: first asking Philip – who is a Greek speaker –, then Philip asking Andrew, and finally them both asking Jesus. But then Jesus' answer does not make sense. He does not say whether or not he wants to meet these visitors, but instead talks about his death.

Could it be that being approached in such a cautious, roundabout way triggered Jesus to feel he was going to be the scapegoat? Anyway, he goes straight to the heart of the matter: *unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest*. Jesus does not point at any sacrifice, human or divine, but at the fundamental attitude of accepting life as it comes as a gift from God. You cannot possess life, you cannot add anything to its length, you did not create it. Life is God's gift. Full stop.

The second thing, to make this given life truly human and really worth living, is to learn. The Greek visitors come to Jesus by way of his disciples. That is how people today come to Jesus: by way of his followers. Yes, that's us. We should be teaching and practicing the love of God, bypassing evil and our own selfishness. And while we teach and act, we are learning. Teaching and learning are bi-directional, they enhance each other.

Now the first way of learning we pick up in life is actually to mimic our parents. And it has proven to be a very effective way of learning. Yet, at some point we will need to grow up and move on from only mimicking.

Religiously speaking faith starts similarly: we imitate Jesus. But! Just doing what tradition told you, does not make you grow up in faith. At some point you need to start believing for yourself and find your own way with it. That is not leaving tradition behind,

but rather adding your own experience to that tradition. God wants us to go that way. Imitating Christ leads us to finding God's image in ourselves. It helps us to turn our anger into peace, our envy into compassion. Imitating Christ does not make us copycats, but free and committed followers and partners.

Jeremiah prophesied that Israel would receive a new covenant. The Jewish people have have learned the hard way what it means to have a covenant *written in their hearts*. They have been persecuted and murdered for it. Today they clearly struggle to extend this new covenant to other people living in Israel and Palestine. The fact that some other people make it very difficult for them to practise the peace of God, is no excuse. The road still leads on.

Jesus prophesied that becoming part of God's new covenant with all creation includes losing your selfishness and unhelpful desires. The church has learned this the hard way. It has made major mistakes when crusades were send out, when slavery and colonialism were supported, when the church chose the side of the powerful and failed the poor. But the church's own prophets have told it how to change for better. The road still leads on.

Jesus died for us. That means that he went all the way ahead of us. We will have to follow. But this is not an impossible mission, or a doomed quest. We still hear the prophetic words telling us that beyond all that continues to kill human life, there is God's promise. A new covenant. It is there, really!

Amen.

**Hymn** : 'When Jesus saw the fishermen' (CH 340)

**Offering brought forward**

**Prayer of Intercession**

*[IN KILCALMONELL:]*

**Hymn** : 'Christ is our light' (CH 336)

**Statement**

**Affirmation**

**Prayer**

**Baptism**

**Benediction** : 'The Lord bless you and keep you' (CH 796)

**Promise of parents**

**Commitment of congregation**

**Prayer**

**Closing Hymn** : 'Be thou my vision' (CH 465 – *tune: Slane*)

**Blessing**

*[IN KILLEAN & KILCHENZIE:]*

**Closing Hymn** : 'Now the green blade riseth' (CH 417)

**Blessing**