

In a relationship

29 3 09

My text this morning may be found in today's Old Testament passage from the prophet Jeremiah, 'The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new Covenant with the house of Israel and Judah . . . I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people.' (31 v31, 33)

If you are a fan of Clint Eastwood, you may well enjoy his latest film, 'Gran Torino' in which he both stars and directs. The Gran Torino of the title is his classic Ford car which is his pride and joy. 'Gran Torino' is a film about a Korean War Veteran, Walt Kowalski, who worked in the car industry in Detroit. Now an old man whose wife has recently died, Walt finds himself alienated from his family and his largely immigrant neighbours, among whom are a community of Hmong, a hill people from Vietnam who had supported the Americans during the Vietnam War and who were consequently forced to flee when the Americans withdrew. Scowling and craggy-faced, Walt is the epitome of the grumpy old man who radiates his anger and conceals his pain by the sharp way he talks to people, in particular to the fresh-faced, young, Catholic priest who conducted his wife's funeral mass. The film is one of redemption in which through love of neighbour, Walt comes to accept himself, comes to terms with his guilt and his failings thereby enabling him to come to love himself and possibly even to love God. The end of the film, if you are a fan of Clint Eastwood, is not what you are expecting.

Today is the start of Passiontide, Passion Sunday, when we begin the two week run up to Easter Day. The Passion of our Lord is a central act in our salvation story but instead of focusing on the cross and empty tomb, the crucifixion and resurrection, I want to step back from the means of salvation and instead consider briefly the point or purpose of salvation – to have a relationship with God.

As human beings, we are social solitaries. We are intended to be both individuals and members of a family and a community. We need to be alone and we need to be in the company of others. At the heart of religion is the idea of being in relationship with God. The very word religion comes from the Latin ‘re – ligare’ to tie back. This union, this binding back of Man to God, is the purpose of religion. Throughout the Old Testament is the history of this Covenant with God. There is a Covenant with Adam and a Covenant with Noah; there is the Covenant with Abraham and the Covenant with Moses. There is a Covenant with David and today from the prophet Jeremiah, we hear the promise of the New Covenant which, as Christians, we see as realised in the person of Jesus Christ.

The word Covenant means a solemn bond, a legal agreement by word of mouth which both parties swear to keep. It has entitlement and obligations, rights and responsibilities. In essence, Covenant is summed up in the Covenant formula: ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’. The whole of the Old Testament is a faith history which wrestles with the idea that the Jewish nation was a people chosen by God and how they prospered and failed to prosper through their disobedience of the Laws of God.

What is distinctive about the Christian compared to the Jewish view of the Covenant with God is that our Covenant is not based on conformity and obedience to a set of external law but the rule of God is internalised in our heart. Christianity should be external but internalised, not extrinsic but intrinsic motivation. We have an individual and a collective relationship with God because we have had a change of heart. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is something that should affect our heart, our very being, our way of seeing and making sense of what God is prepared to do for us because he loves us.

So this Passiontide, as we again move to remember and to consider the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us remember what religion is truly about is the possibility of having a loving relationship with our God. And because that relationship is a question of love, God is not forcing us but inviting us to respond to his love by an inner transformation, in how we see and treat our neighbours and in how we regard ourselves.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

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H: Sermon 19: In relationship

