

As in previous weeks, we concentrated on the readings from the Old Testament in our Lenten lectio groups and, as ever, found a great deal to ponder over and to stimulate thought, not least, this week, on what it means to have God's Law 'written in' our 'hearts' and to never have 'our sin called to mind' – the act of forgiveness. The former provoked wonder at its universality – *they will all know me the least no less than the greatest* – and the latter, both wonder and despair or even envy: how can anyone forgive in such a complete manner? 'I find it really difficult,' said some. And a common thread began to emerge, for the former puzzle prompted one person to recount how in her nursing days in palliative care, love was not exclusive to Christians (and, one might add here, to Jews only, or indeed to any one of any particular religious persuasion or intellectual ability). She found it in all sorts of people 'from the least to the greatest.' And the latter puzzle, on the difficulty of forgiveness, prompted another person to recount her story of a simple hug on one occasion, being returned much later on another, to seal an act of forgiveness which words and feeling would otherwise never have achieved. And the common thread to this, and perhaps to all today's readings, is that, when God's law of love is written on our hearts, we do not have to dress our actions up or even explain them in 'religious-speak' – they speak for themselves. We can tie ourselves up in knots over this in our fear that only 'religious-speak' or overtly religious actions done in the name of Jesus, for example, are what matter, are what it is to truly witness to Christ. There was, I think, an example of this, recently, in the Church Times when a school chaplain witnessed beautifully to how she had coped with exercising her ministry under lockdown by making many more telephone calls to parents than she would normally do. In her words:

They're not seeing anyone, and I think they're just pleased that someone's asking how they're doing.

And then she adds, in an almost apologetic manner:

I'm not very spiritual in my conversations generally – I'm very much led by who I'm talking to. It's just offering that support that those of us who belong to churches take a little bit for granted. People who have that don't necessarily have someone they can reach out to and say 'This is really tough.' (Becky 19.2.21)

Now, I think we are talking here about 'purity of heart' and 'spontaneity'; *having an open, natural and uninhibited manner* (as described in the Oxford Dictionary of English). Good grief! We're English after all! or some of us – and being uninhibited is not our natural manner. But there's a confusion, too, about what exactly is 'spiritual.' In the *New Colledgeville Biblical Commentary* on this passage from Jeremiah, for example, the commentator stresses that

this new covenant (the one, that is, written in our hearts) *is not spiritualized or universalized but is grounded in the Lord's actions on behalf of the people of this time in their history and these actions will define their future.* (p. 80 I)

Good Heavens! What on earth is going on here! For every action of God is symbolic of God's actions everywhere and every action of ours is symbolic of where we are with God. Which is why, although the passage in Jeremiah needs to be complemented and completed by the action of Christ, (as we see from the passage in the gospel of John) its scope is already profoundly spiritual and universal and able to speak for itself. Christ, in this sense, interprets history for us, but we don't have to interrupt history with religious talk in order for this to be so. The history of the People of God, whether Jews or Christians, speaks to, and for, all people – it signifies the spiritual, or if one has to say so, the religious journey everyone has to make. Israel's ups and downs are our own.

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