

Heart-knowledge of God

After one of my favourite passages in Jeremiah last week, today we have a better-known purple passage: the new covenant.

You'll remember that when the prodigal son returns, the father welcomes him with open arms. Although the son had good as wished him dead and then squandered the entire inheritance he'd foolishly granted him, the father gives him not, as he is about to request, the position of a hired servant; not even a second chance under the same conditions as before; but a whole new order of relationship: a loving embrace; a robe and a ring signifying status and authority; and a joyful feast – a bit like being made an Honorary Canon!

That's the sort of thing the Lord is promising his wayward people through the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah. His former covenant was encapsulated in the law given on Sinai – yet it wasn't just a matter of following the rules. It had been initiated by their deliverance from Egypt; and had the nature of a marriage bond with their God: *though I was their husband*, said the Lord. Yet the house of Israel and the house of Judah broke that covenant, and suffered the consequences, as Jeremiah was painfully made to point out to them. But now the prophet is given words, *not to pluck up and ... destroy*, but *to build and to plant*. He received the promise of a new order of relationship between God and his people: *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts ... they shall all know me ... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more*.

They shall all know me. Clearly this isn't head knowledge: this is knowledge of the heart. We can detach ourselves from head knowledge: *I know x and y – but, nevertheless, I'm going to do z!* But heart knowledge shapes our behaviour from within. That's what we aspire to when we look for a culture change within an organisation or community. Telling people what to do only gets you so far: they need to want it for themselves. We've seen something of that in safeguarding in the Church of England: moving from promoting procedures and practices – although they are still there and relevant – to talking about why this matters in the Church – and what harm has been caused when it didn't matter enough. Heart knowledge of God's nature, of what God desires, of God's love, leads us to want to reflect his nature in ourselves; seek his desires in the world around us; and to return and share his love.

That, of course, is what Jesus did – and what led him to tell the parable of the prodigal father and his prodigal son; and *his* resentful elder brother, who also needed a change of heart. There were those around who set out to keep the law, but whose actions demonstrated to Jesus that they did not know God. Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfil it: as it were, to write it on people's hearts. The new covenant initiated by the shedding of his blood on the cross is a covenant of the heart: St. Paul wrote, *God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father*.

The recent clergy conference consisted of three days of worship; input and discussion; social time and networking; and afternoon, optional, so-called *fringe* activities. Because I'm an introvert, all that contact with people was draining: I felt I needed to get away during those fringe afternoons. On the first, a visit to the Julian shrine beckoned. I hoped that there I might find some silence. There had been so many words: good words for sure, but a lot of them. How delighted I was when our guide invited us to sit in Julian's cell for 15 minutes of silence!

I may have been fleeing from extravert activity, but, as any monk or nun will tell you, silent prayer isn't a cop out. St. John of the Cross claimed that *Silence is God's first language*. Someone else observed that silence is also the language of lovers: just being in each other's presence. I'm thinking that silent prayer might be one way for me to nurture my heart knowledge of God.

When I'm with the Sisters of Bethany, or visiting some other religious community, I usually find it easy and very welcome to merge into something of their pattern of prayer – which usually includes times of silence. Yet I rarely make time for it in the busyness of the rest of my life. It's much harder there: there are prayers to say and then things to do. Even if there is silence around me, there isn't in my head! I came away from Julian's shrine wondering if I should try more silent prayer. I'm not sure I've managed it yet.

But I do try to make something of silence when leading worship; particularly in the liturgy of the sacrament. We surround it with words – good words – but sacraments express things which are beyond words: they need some space around them, so that they can speak the heart-language of God. [In the words of the Book of Common Prayer] *that all we, who are partakers of this holy Communion, may be fulfilled with thy grace and heavenly benediction*.

Silence, sacraments. What else? Having worshipped at a few Cathedral Evensongs recently, for me, church music ... But I think that's enough words from me. Over to you: what gives you heart-knowledge of God – and do you need more of it?