

**Downing Place URC**

**20<sup>th</sup> October 2019**

**11am**

Jer 31: 27-34      The law shall be written on their hearts  
Ps 119: 97-104  
2Tim 3:14 - 4:5    They will accumulate teachers to suit their own desires  
Lk 18: 1-8          Justice for those who cry out day and night.

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Jer 31: 33      *I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.*  
2 Tim 3:16:    *All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

Let me try to put those two scriptures together, starting with II Timothy.

The writer is telling Timothy - and, indirectly, telling us - that the scriptures provide all we need for Christian guidance. People who come with extra stories that add new and attractive features to the conventional Christian message are to be avoided. For us, of course, those scriptures are, quite simply, our bible.

But in times of stress, our author says, people will *'not put up with sound teaching.'* Instead, *'having itchy ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires.'*

There is, surely, nothing new about people believing what they want to believe regardless of the facts. Nevertheless, do you not find the contemporary resistance to informed opinion - be

it about climate change or vaccines or whatever - quite remarkable? What people *want to believe* is true seems to matter more than what *is* true. How did we get here?

Some fifty years ago an obscure social theory emerged claiming that all truth is relative, that there is no shared, common truth, but only your truth and my truth. Today, obscure no longer, this has been popularised in a trivial sense. It is rather like someone discovering St Augustine's famous dictum, 'Love God, and do what you will' and concluding that they may do absolutely whatever they like! - a profound truth wilfully misunderstood into a dangerously trivial untruth. Similarly, the idea that there is no shared truth, but only your truth and my truth, may well hold in some profound sense, but in a trivial sense, it is dangerously untrue.

To reduce it to absurdity, suppose my truth is that there is no traffic and I may cross safely the road, but the bus driver's truth is that the bus is rushing towards me? I shall soon discover which truth is our shared truth.

*'For the time is coming,' warns our writer, 'when people will not put up with sound doctrine' - well-informed opinion, shall we say - 'but having itchy ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.'*

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We Christians often claim the absolute and exclusive truth of our Scriptures. But we live in a world containing three great monotheistic traditions. They all make the same claim about their Scriptures. And they are at each other's throats. What are we to do? Fight to the death? You might not think that Christianity is at anybody's throat, but that is not how it looks to those Muslims who understand the West and Christianity to be the same thing. What is more, there is a lot in what they say, however much we might regret what they do about it. Manifestly, our world lacks a shared and common truth.

Nor is this just a global or a societal problem. I have known plenty of families torn apart for lack of a shared truth. One part of the family has the truth as they see it, with all the bitter evidence of half a lifetime. And they are right. The other part has the truth as they see it, with all the bitter evidence - different evidence - of half a lifetime. They too are right.

So they finish up where the widow did in Jesus' gospel story - wasting their years and their money pursuing justice in the courts. And Jesus' point? In the Kingdom of Heaven, justice doesn't work like that.

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Let me turn now to our reading from Jeremiah 31 - some six hundred years before Jesus.

Jeremiah heard the voice of God:

*'The days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. .... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.'*

If you believe that those prophetic words were fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, you are forced to a remarkable conclusion:

The Law of God is written on your heart. *And - no-where -else.*

So what is this book for? Exactly what we heard - for *'teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.'* So: attend to it diligently. But if you then want to know what God actually requires of you, don't go back to the book. Look at what is written on your heart.

In the twelfth century, in Bologna, a Christian lawyer called Gratian took the pagan law books of the Roman Empire, and all the declarations of the Christian Church, and moulded them into a single systematic Christian Law, thus laying the foundations for the civil and criminal law that today we Westerners take for granted. It was an extraordinary achievement. We call it *Decretum Gratiani*. He wrote on the cover of his book, 'The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."' - Jesus' simple law of love. Nothing that failed this test made it into his book. He added that his work would stand in need of constant revision. Why? Because he knew that today's justice is tomorrow's injustice. And why is that? Because the demands of love change.

A simple, obvious example: what my son requires of me today, at the age of forty, is not what he required at the age of four. The law of love is the same as forty years ago, but today it cashes out completely differently. No more piggybacks.

So, how am I to know what God requires of me as regards my son? Of course, I listen hard. I attend to the facts as best I can. I turn to Scripture for '*teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness*'. I consult wise and loving friends. But when it comes to what I am actually going to do or say, then I must read what God has written on my heart.

And here's the thing! As Gratian foresaw, every time I read what is on my heart, *it is new*.

It is new! The scriptures are unchanging, but the law of God - what God requires of you and me - that is *always* changing, *always* new. And it is written on our hearts. Nowhere else.

And here, surprisingly, is hope: for me and my son, for our nation, and for the world.

Of course, our hope must lie in part with our law-makers. We must have just laws. But once the law is determined, and there are hurt losers and triumphant winners, healing lies in our heeding the writing on our hearts. Just as in Ireland, twenty years on from the Good Friday agreement, it is the slow, step by step changes in people's hearts that have brought Ireland from endless killings to relative peace. Law is but the essential beginning, not the end.

I watch our world with dismay and confusion. So much suffering! The West can send in armies and send in aid. The West can withdraw armies and withdraw aid. Is it naive of me, or is it simply the case, that nothing actually changes without a change of heart? Surely our Christian message to ourselves, to other Christians, to those of other faiths and of no faith, is 'The problem isn't that you don't believe in Jesus. Nor that you are not Christian, or not the right sort of Christian. The problem is what is written - not just on *your* heart - on *our hearts*.' It is just the same with the family, with the neighbours, the nation, and the entire world. The problem is what is written on our hearts.

Some time around 1770, John Wesley, in his sermon entitled 'On the Catholic Spirit,' quoted from II Kings 10. Jehu, greeting Jehonadab, asks (in the language of the King James Bible), 'Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?' Jehonadab says, 'It is.' Jehu responds, 'If it be, give me thine hand.'

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Let me try to sum up:

Jeremiah, during the dreadful last days of Israel before total destruction, heard the voice of God saying,

*'I will put my law within them, and I will write write it on their hearts.'*

We read in 2 Timothy that scripture is for '*teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.*'

My friends, I suppose I have come here this morning with a simple, almost naive message: Let us indeed be taught, reprovved, corrected and trained in righteousness by our scriptures.

But in all things, in matters large and small, world-defining and utterly trivial, let us be ruled by what God in Christ Jesus has written on our hearts.

Amen.