

Fifth Sunday of Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
21 March 2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34

There is a major difference in how we see identity today versus how the Jewish mind saw identity in the Old Testament. For us today our identity is mostly determined by our behavior, by what we do. You are what you do. There is a little story about violinist Fritz Kreisler, one of the most famous European violinists in the 19th century. As he was waiting for a boat to sail to England, Kreisler had an hour to spare before departure. He wandered into a music shop, where the proprietor asked if he could look at the violin Kreisler was carrying. He then vanished and returned with two policemen, one of whom told the violinist, "You are under arrest." "What for?" asked Kreisler. "You have Fritz Kreisler's violin." "I am Fritz Kreisler." The policeman did not believe him. He said, "You can't lie to us. Come along to the station." As Kreisler's boat was sailing soon, there was no time for prolonged explanations. Kreisler asked for his violin and played a piece he was well known for. "Now are you satisfied?" he asked. They were! (Today in the Word, December 22, 1992.)

Kreisler identity had become deeply interwoven with what he did for a living. The Jewish mind, on the other hand, has a sense of identity that is deeply rooted in history. History gives them a sense of identity and place. In a very real sense, for the Jewish mind, you are because you have been. Your history defines you. A fundamentally important part of this history is the record of God's promises and the fulfillment of such promises since God called Abraham to seed a new chosen nation. This record gives the people an assurance of God's love and of the importance of the nation in relation to the world. God had chosen Israel and through Israel God would bless the world. This is at the center of Jewish pride, nationalism, and identity. This realization imprints a special stamp of approval in their hearts and their minds. They are the chosen people, God's first son!

Sitting around the campfires or the dining room tables, the Jewish family often talked about their special place in human history. God had created them, had protected them throughout their history, had brought them out of Egypt, had made them into a nation, had constantly defended them from the attacks of enemy armies, had given them strong men and women to lead them, had given them David, the greatest of Jewish kings, and had extended their borders. They were the children of the promise.

God often affirmed his love for his nation through Covenants or promises he made to his children. The Covenants God made with Noah, Abraham, and later on with David were Covenants whose fulfillment lay in the future. God had said, "Never again will I destroy the earth by water," or "I will make you into a great nation," or "Your kingdom will last forever." The fulfillment of these Covenants was to take place in the future. Better yet, these three Covenants were exclusively dependent upon God. It was God who

would protect the nation from floods, would give descendants to Abraham, and would put someone on David's throne forever.

But there is another Covenant God makes with his people and this is the Covenant he makes with Moses. This is a drastically different Covenant. Whereas in the other covenants, the blessing is not related to human action but to God's action, in the Covenant with Moses the "express purpose is linked with actions of God's people in obeying or disobeying His commandments." Whereas in the other covenants the focus is "on the future and what God intends to do at history's end," the Covenant with Moses focuses "on the present and how God will treat living generations." And whereas the other covenants "state an unchanging purpose and intention of God that will not be changed," the covenant with Moses is meant to be temporary and to be replaced by a better, New Covenant." (Richards, "Teacher's Commentary", 414-419.)

The Covenant with Moses, also called the law, described a complex set of 613 commandments, rules, and ordinances that mandated the appropriate way of relating between human beings, between the person and the nation, between the nation and God, and most importantly between the individual and God. This was a covenant of works. If the person obeyed the commandments the Lord had given the nation to order their lives, then that person would be blessed. But if a person failed to follow the commandments of the law, then that person would be cursed. It was likewise at the national level, when the nation obeyed the commandments of the Law the nation was blessed. The nation would be allowed to advance its borders, to enjoy the blessings of progress, to live in luxury and comfort, and to enjoy the spoils of war. On the other hand, when the nation acted in a disobedient manner, the Law demanded that the nation be cursed. These curses came in the form of pestilence, attacks by invading armies, and political insurrection from within. Ultimately, the nation's disobedience would cause them the loss of the Promised Land.

By the time the prophet Jeremiah comes into the picture, the nation had been sliding into a pattern of disobedience to God: cultic idolatry, great injustice against the poor, the widow, and the orphan, and unholy political alliances. All these behaviors were in direct violation of God's wishes. Jeremiah reminds his people that the curses of the law were coming, and the nation would lose everything the Lord had given them as an inheritance. Yet despite the prophet's warnings and despite the fact that the signs were clear enough for all to see, the nation failed to listen, and the exile became a reality in the prophet's own day.

It is at this time that the prophet Jeremiah begins to preach the promise of a new law. "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." This New Covenant would be radically different because it would not be a covenant of works. This law would be an internal law, a law of the heart. God said, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." The Lord would establish a new way of relating, where he himself would write his law in their hearts. In the future a

right relationship with God would not be a matter of doing things, but a matter of being. A matter of identity. Human beings would be internally disposed to God. They would naturally gravitate towards God. God himself would create a gravitational pull that would bring his people back to himself. Out of love, God would give his people a new heart, a longing for him, a natural desire to love him and to please him. The law would be a matter of the heart and not a matter of obedience to works.

From the time of Jeremiah, the people were anxiously awaiting the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the New Covenant. Yet, ironically, when Jesus of Nazareth came into the scene preaching a new Kingdom of Heaven, a new way of relating based on love, and a Covenant where humans could be reconciled to God through acceptance of his free gift of salvation through his son, the same people who were anxiously awaiting the New Covenant failed to accept him. This gift was not wrapped in the right type of packaging. This Messiah had no armor and mighty weapons. This Messiah looked like a beggar and was surrounded by people who looked like beggars. How can this man be the one who was to come? Jesus used the Old Testament symbol of the sacrificed lamb whose blood ratified Covenants between two parties, yet they did not understand. Jesus said, "This is the blood of the New Covenant," but they failed to capture the full meaning of the expression. He shed his own blood on the cross, yet they still refused to believe.

We are truly blessed today. We are the children of the New Covenant, the children of Grace. I invite you, therefore, to come and eat. On this wooden altar our Lord will become bread and wine for you and me. Today, we get to enjoy the promises millions of our pre-resurrection ancestors hoped for. May we come to this table with grateful and repentant hearts and share in the body and blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This blood secured our salvation for us. The High Priest, Christ Jesus, our Lord, has offered himself up for you and me.

Come before his presence with thanksgiving and offer yourself to him as a living sacrifice. Offer your lives to him, for whoever gives their life to him will save their life, but whoever fails to offer their life to him will lose it. Come and eat and be whole. Amen!