



Harvest Festival, Year C – October 10, 2010

Jeremiah 32.1-3a,6-15

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon Herbert O'Driscoll

In the year 597 BCE the most powerful military machine in the world of that time attacked Jerusalem. During the months leading up to the attack a single voice dominated the discourse of that small society. We know him as Jeremiah but, because we encounter him in the Bible, we rarely think of him as a human being living in a complex tough time.

We know some things about him. We know that he was highly emotional, immensely courageous and politically savvy. We also know that he was determined to get his city authorities to realize that it was futile to try to defy the Babylonians. For that determination he was ridiculed, dismissed as a collaborator, and even, for a while, imprisoned.

But before that happened he made a gesture that has come down through time and speaks powerfully to us in our time.

On the surface it must have seemed idiotic. He bought a piece of real estate. The market must have been crashing around him, yet he did this. Talk about mortgage meltdown!. He even took care to have a lawyer present and he called witnesses to see what he was doing.. And perhaps because he saw puzzlement and bewilderment on the faces around him, he held up the document and said "I want this to last for a long time because - Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel - houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" .

It's an extraordinary example of trust in the future at a very unpromising time.

So – a question. Why in heavens name should we be in the least interested in that long ago incident. Its two and half millennia ago. Its in an utterly different world. Why bother?

I think we should bother for a very important reason. These days we are moving through a time of much fear and much loss of confidence in the future. This is true whether you are talking about our economy, the quality of our social structures, our political institutions and generally our place in the world.

So – if we agree on that, because we're here in a Church, lets just look at one aspect of that future. Let's think about our Christian faith and our life as a Christian congregation in today's Canada.

First, let me list a few huge changes in the life of the church that have taken place in my lifetime. If you're in your forties or younger you will not see these things as changes because they have been the norm all your life.

Our generation of Christians in Canada has seen the church change from being an integral part of Canadian society to being a spectator on its periphery.

We have seen the church changed from being at least one of the sources of moral guidance and reflection in Canadian society to being denied almost all legitimacy in these areas.

We have seen the church changed from being an institution that up to the middle of the last century drew energy and creativity from each succeeding new generation, to being an institution that is beginning to fear that it can no longer draw the interest or allegiance of all but a few of a new generation.

We have seen the church changed from being an institution whose houses of worship graced almost every community and were a focus of life in a spreading city, to one whose houses of worship are in some cases emptying and in some cases even closing.

Now – something very important. We could offer valid reasons why these are not so much our failures as they are the inevitable effects of the vast and complex social and cultural transition through which we are all moving. We can also point to vast areas of the world, especially in the southern hemisphere, where these things are not true, where the life of Christian churches is extraordinarily vibrant, where the church is recognized and included at the heart of society, and where religion is looked to as a source of moral reflection and action both personal and political. All of this we need to include if we are to get a complete picture. But it still is true that here among us in our culture we face the realities I have named, and they challenge us.

BUT – small word but a very big word – BUT – SUPPOSE THERE IS IN ALL OF THIS A FACTOR, AN EVEN NEWER REALITY THAT IS APPEARING ALL AROUND US. Not just in the church. Not just in religion but - ALL AROUND US.

This new reality is that western culture is changing in a way that would have been totally unexpected even thirty years ago, Flowing across western consciousness is a new tide of something hard to pin down and define but what is more and more frequently being called *spirituality*. Forget for the moment religion. Forget church. Go in your mind into the culture...into the media..go anywhere...

The phone rings and Michel Valpy from the Globe says "We're hoping to introduce an element of spirituality in our web site. Any ideas?"

I walk into a coffee shop and as I push the door open I see three words on the door – Celebrate the Rituals.

I read Margaret Somerville's Massey lectures and she asks me if I have noticed how the language of the environmental movement is becoming more and more the language of spirituality.

And this is only to name a few instances. It is as if our culture has picked up a new lens through which to see the world, and is therefore experiencing again what many thought it had lost, a sense of wonder and awe. We're experiencing this wonder and awe firstly before the mystery of creation, especially the natural environment in which we live and which we affect: Secondly before the mysteries of our own humanity in breakthroughs in such fields as reproductive technologies, in therapeutic drug discoveries. Thirdly we feel wonder and awe before the tsunami of instantaneous new information and new knowledge that is both drawing humanity together and at the same time threatening its cohesion.

These almost incomprehensible new tides are calling to all of us, but particularly to new generations. We are now walking in streets where almost every young man or woman is bent in concentration on a tiny piece of technology in the palm of their hand that puts them literally in touch with the whole world.

As we try to understand these new realities, we are beginning to be aware of a new and contradictory reality. We are seeing a new generation that is spiritual but not religious, a generation that even when it believes does not wish to belong. And in such a new world we have to ask a question. What does the future hold for the church? – and once again I want to emphasize that we are speaking of the church in our own culture.

Let's go back to the long ago incident where we started – Jeremiah's decision to buy real estate in a disintegrating world. Jeremiah knew something very important, something we very badly need to know in our own time. He knew that hoping against hope that things were going to remain the same, and hoping that they would all muddle through somehow, was simply not on. He knew that the coming of Babylonian power and culture meant that the approaching future would be quite unlike the past to which they have been accustomed. What had worked in that past would not work in the future. Business as usual was no longer possible.

Our situation is similar. We are all aware that in every aspect of its life the Church is struggling to respond to new realities. By the way, it isn't just the church. Ask political parties and they will tell you of their struggle.

So then, what should we do? Who and what should we try to be? Let me offer some thoughts for the road ahead....

First let's go back in time to that moment when Jeremiah held up the document of sale and said "You know why I am doing this? Because even though everything we have and know and believe in is deeply threatened, I am certain of one thing. Houses, lands and vineyards will again be bought in this land". How does that apply to our situation., and by the way, you can sum up our situation in a sentence. For much of western culture Spirituality is in and Organized religion (the Church) is out.

But – here we go again on that word that is so small yet so big. Like Jeremiah, there is one thing we know that changes the equation.

We know that every spirituality since the world began has always done one of two things. It has either institutionalized - meaning that it has built a structure for its corporate life - or it has died. So – if indeed our culture is showing strong signs that it cannot live without a spiritual dimension to its life, then one thing is certain. That spiritual dimension will form structures and institutions through which it will express itself and its life in society.

We can already see that institutionalizing process beginning with what some voices are calling the great new secular religion of our time, the environmental movement. In her last Massey Lectures Margaret Somerville points to this.

If this is so, then it is the vocation of Christian churches to be ready in the future to offer themselves as gathering places for a new spiritual age, offering Christ as the pattern of a renewed humanity, offering the sacred meal of Eucharist or the Mass as spiritual nurture and offering the narrative of the Bible as one instrument – ONE instrument -for seeking the mystery we call God.

And as we do this, we will continually ask one all important question. Given that we are in a Gutenberg moment of transforming human communications – given that we can no more ignore the new ways of communication than a person in Germany in the 15th century could ignore the new reality of the printed page - how do we best communicate to the society around us these treasures we have to offer.

If then we hope for such a future world and we hope to offer Christian faith as our gift to it, then here in the present – now – this year – at this stage in our lives, whether we be 20 or 40 or 60 or 80 we have to in various ways prepare for that future, even if it is a future that we who are older may not ourselves see. We have to trust God for the future. Not only do we have to trust it, we have to commit ourselves to it.

How do we do this? We do it by offering the very best we can offer to today's Christian community. Our best thinking, our finest worship, our most sincere prayer, our most beautiful music, our best preaching, our most attractive and relevant programming, especially programming that is directed to children and youth, our committed engagement with the society around us, and, supporting all this and making it possible, our serious financial commitment.

For now I would suggest that here in Christ Church a group of us, or even groups of us, would consider looking at three recent books. All three are very accessible and readable. The first is Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christianity*. The second is called *The Search for Spirituality*. It's by Ursula King, a British academic in the University of Bristol. And the third is *The Future of Faith*, by Harvey Cox of Harvard.

I commend these to you because it is not enough that only certain people in positions of leadership do this preparation for the future. We all need to be doing it. Every one of us needs to consider making an investment in the future, because this we know to be true – the future, whatever it will be, belongs to God, and that future will continue to challenge the church to serve in it and to play a role in it. The wrong question is "Will there be a church in the future"? The right question is "What kind of a church will there be in the future. "?

Out of the past, across almost 2500 years, a voice from the pages of the Bible is asking us to do two things. To trust God for the future, and to offer the very best of ourselves to what that future is demanding of us now.

A thought as I look around me. You didn't paint this place just because it was grubby. You didn't fix up the pews because they were worn. You transformed this place – and you will transform it even more - because at some level you believe that there is a future to be prepared for...Jeremiah would say "Well done"...