

## **GOD'S PLANS CHANGE, BUT HIS PURPOSE STAYS THE SAME**

Readings: Jeremiah 31: 7-14 and John 1: 10-18

If you've had children, what was your wish for them?  
Probably to grow up happy, secure, right living, and able to cope on their own independently of you.

And what is God's wish for his people?  
For us to grow up, happy, secure, right living, and depending on him. Those are very similar, aren't they, except that God wants us to carry on depending on him. Is He just being possessive and selfish, not wanting to let us go? One reason for parents to want children to learn to be independent of them is that at some stage they won't be there; that's not the case with God. But, still, why is He so concerned about our relationship with him? Perhaps because He knows that depending on him will be the best thing for us, and for our relationships with each other.

Let's come back to parents and children. As a parent, you start with a perfect child who just smiles and cries and can't argue or defy you. And at 9 months it all changes, and you have to begin to cope with a child who does not do as you want, who has its own personality and who argues back. You don't want to break its spirit, nor do you want to destroy the love between you, but you have to do something. You try different ways to punish and love it: smacking, a naughty step, scolding, sending it up to its room, withdrawing treats.... When one way doesn't work, you try another. As the child gets older, you can - hopefully - reason with it more. Your aim is to achieve a good, strong, loving relationship, which can survive all life's ups and downs.

In Genesis the Garden of Eden is a picture of a similar early perfect relationship between us and God. That soon

disappears, and God's into the same situation as a parent - after all, one of his names is "Father" - trying to keep a close, loving relationship with us while still facing up to our waywardness towards him and towards each other. His plan always seems to be to start small and then to build up from there. So He starts with Abraham, calling him from nothing, and making him the head of a new people, the Jews, and giving them a land of their own. No doubt, God hoped that starting from nothing and having no land of their own at first, they would revel in their relationship with a God who had given them so much. God's plan was always that, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." And to cope with their sinfulness He arranged a sacrifice system which, he hoped, would help his people to stay close to him.

And the Old Testament is a chronicle of God's people lurching between joyful following of God and outright rebellion against him. When they are following God their lives are reasonably holy and the country functions well; when they turn away from him, they become immoral and their country falls apart. In that first reading, from the book of Jeremiah 600 years before Jesus, persistent rebellion against God is about to lead to the destruction of the whole country for decades, until their repentance enables God to bring them back and to start again.

Then in New Testament times God ups the stakes in sending his only Son, God himself, to earth. His plan is still the same: to reach the whole world through a few, but now it's not through the Jews but through any people, Jew or Gentile, who respond to Jesus; the idea of a God-fearing nation has disappeared. God still keeps the concept of sacrifice to deal with sin, but now it's the one-off sacrifice of his Son, never to be repeated, that secures our forgiveness. And Christians don't just celebrate God himself having lived and died in our world, but we have God with us all the time in the form of the Holy Spirit. He

can and does act when we respond to God's call, and God's plan in Jesus has seen a vast expansion of God's people in the last 2000 years.

Let me end with some provocative questions - and I don't have definitive answers, although I do have ideas on them:

1/ Was it because God's first plan with the Jews failed that God sent Jesus or was it that mankind was now ready for a new, bigger plan?

2/ Is it a failure on God's part that so many people don't respond today? If not, where does the blame lie, if, indeed, there is blame?

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