

## Covenant Renewal Sermon

31<sup>st</sup> December 2017

Jeremiah 31.31-34

Luke 22.14-20

There's a tree that I can see from my bedroom window, which I look at while I'm drinking my coffee every morning. I watch the colours change, leaf buds form, blossom wondrously appearing, and the various birds visiting throughout the changing seasons. It's a reminder to me of God's creation being in a constant state of flux.

And we humans are continuously changing, physically, mentally, emotionally. Generations come and go...we witness in our own lives the cycles of birth and death.

Yet we can be certain that one thing never changes. God's nature never changes.

God is faithful; Hebrews 13.5 tells us he will never leave or forsake us. His love for us is eternal and remains steady amidst all the stormy seas of life. He is the one constant in our lives and in the whole of creation. He is the same, yesterday, today and forever.

This Covenant Renewal Service has been my favourite service of the year for a long time. To me, this service is the most significant of the year; I am making a personal and corporate promise to God, trusting in his promises, along with my fellow Christian sisters, brothers, and siblings.

It's special because it marks a celebration of God's faithfulness – something I have grown to know and understand more fully over the years.

It's a service where we can take time to reflect on what covenant means and to personally renew our commitment to God.

So let's look first at the meaning of covenant... The Hebrew word for covenant, *berith*, means a formal agreement between two parties with each assuming some obligation. When God makes covenants he takes the initiative, he promises blessings and he requires obedience. There is no bargaining between

God and his people. He sets the terms and conditions and our obligation is to be obedient.

The theme of covenant is central to the entire Bible. We see a covenant relationship between God and his people running throughout Old Testament history.

In Genesis 3.1-7 we read how the first humans broke the very first covenant with God, choosing not to be obedient, and therefore suffered God's punishment - all humanity would be out of relationship with God and the whole of creation. The need for repentance and forgiveness begins here and is reinforced with each subsequent covenant made, right up to the New Covenant, established with the coming of Jesus, as prophesied by Jeremiah.

The promises we heard in the OT reading speak of a long and shared history between God and Israel, a history marked by waywardness on the part of the people and by faithfulness on the part of God. He continues to love them despite their disobedience and longs for them to be brought back to him.

'...this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: 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.'

Throughout the Bible we see how God does not give up on us. He is our loving Father, who continually promises, blesses and forgives us. God repeatedly takes the mess people make and offers new opportunities. In Deuteronomy 4.31 we are told 'the Lord your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.' Remember, God has expectations of us. In Exodus 19.5-6 we are told, 'Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples... you shall be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.'

God desires that we obey him and unfailingly reminds his people of the consequences of disobedience, not because he wants to punish us, but because he wants what is best for us.

God establishes a covenant with Noah and his descendants, and all the creatures with him; the sign of the covenant being his 'bow in the clouds'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 9.13

God promises Abraham, 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'<sup>2</sup> Abraham is obedient and God's covenant with him makes him 'the ancestor of a multitude of nations',<sup>3</sup> and is a promise to the Hebrews that they will be a chosen people. Through Abraham's obedience, God is able to make himself known to all people.

In Deuteronomy 11 we see God's covenant made with Moses, identifying the blessings of obedience and the curses of disobedience, and in 2 Samuel 7 David is blessed with the promise of peace from his enemies and through his offspring, God will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

Unlike the old covenant, written on stone tablets that can be broken and scrolls that can be lost, Jeremiah declares the new covenant will be written within the people, on their very hearts. This time it will be done differently and will rely on God's mercy – God offers us total restoration with him through Jesus. By his grace we are forgiven. God will establish a new covenant with Israel: '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.'<sup>4</sup> Clearly this new covenant will be different, the means by which sins would be forgiven forever. God promises an everlasting covenant, to be placed on the hearts of each person, 'so that they may not turn from me.'<sup>5</sup> This is a promise of new life through the Holy Spirit.

In our gospel reading we hear Jesus identifying with this new covenant, telling his disciples, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.' Jesus uses the symbol of wine being poured out to foretell the ultimate sacrifice he will make on the cross. No longer were animal sacrifices needed in order to seal the covenant between God and his people. Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb who would die in the place of sinners. His blood would be sufficient for the forgiveness of sins.

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12.3

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 17.5

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 31.31

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 32.40

So what does it mean for us today to renew our covenant with God?

Well tomorrow is the beginning of a New Year, and some of you may be making traditional New Year resolutions... but I'd like to make a clear distinction between what we do here today and what we might do tomorrow.

Today, God looks for a life-shaping response from us. He calls us to commitments of renewal that involve obedience. If there is anything in the way of our relationship with him, now is the time to examine ourselves, identify our sins, and give up anything that is not pleasing to God.

Today we have the opportunity to give thanks to God for bringing us to another year, and ask forgiveness for all we have done wrong in the year that has passed.

Today we are reminded of God's covenant with the people of Israel, calling them to be a holy nation, chosen to bear witness to his steadfast love by obedience in the law, and this covenant was renewed in Jesus, in his life, work, death and resurrection.

We need to be reminded of our covenant with God and to renew it because we have wayward hearts; our intention is to lead new lives but we return to our old ways, again and again. Today we make a promise to no longer live for ourselves but for God. Renewing our covenant binds us to him and he promises us new life in Jesus – in all he has done for us. Because all this was done on our behalf in order for us to be made right with God.

Today we started the service with the words from Matthew, 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.' Here we are instructed by Jesus to put God first in our lives, to serve and obey him above everything else.

In our home groups this term we have been studying The Eucharist, looking at the symbolic meaning of Jesus offering himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. The Thursday morning home group have reflected on what it means for us as Christians today, when we say at the end of the Eucharist service,

'We offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice'

In other words, what does leading a sacrificial life look like?

I hope most of you would agree that part of being a Christian means to want to become more Christlike, more like Jesus... so let's look to Jesus as our example.

Jesus surrendered to God's will – he put his Father first. His love for his Father poured out to those around him. The way he interacted with people was a way of inclusion and acceptance. He loved the poor, stood up for the oppressed and challenged those in authority who were not living righteous lives.

So what are our priorities? How do we use our time, our energy, our gifts and our money? How do we earn our money? Do we treat others how we would like to be treated?

Perhaps there is an area of your life that you need to put right with God today. Are you taking time to listen to God and how he might be speaking into your life? Are you placing your trust in his purposes for you instead of worrying about the future? Are we willing to leave behind what is comfortable, as did Abraham, to be a blessing to others and grow God's kingdom?

This service of covenant renewal gives us the opportunity to clarify and reaffirm this sacrificial way of life. We can choose to be a living sacrifice, recognising that Jesus is Lord in our lives and proclaiming that only he can save us. He gives us hope, he lights the way and he will lead us home.

Let's put our future in his hands today as we renew our covenant together, remembering that God's laws have been written on our hearts for ever, and trusting in his steadfast love for us.

Amen.