

The New Covenant

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

It's lovely to be able to share with you this morning! I can't quite believe that today is the 5th Sunday of Lent and that this time next week it'll be Palm Sunday - where did Lent 2021 go? I had thought that Lent in lockdown would be hard and seem long; that being stuck at home with all the restrictions would give ample time for the Lentern disciplines of self-examination, prayer and reflection... hmmm - no comment!

However, one of the things I have appreciated this Lent has been the focus on the Old Testament readings and revisiting the really important theme of covenant. I wonder if you remember, a month ago today, on the first Sunday of Lent, we began exploring this theme as we heard about God's covenant with Noah and the sign of the rainbow - ring any bells? Today our brief foray into biblical covenants draws to a close, so before focusing on the reading from Jeremiah, let's quickly recap.

Covenant isn't a word we use or hear that often in daily life. The dictionary defines covenant as, "*an agreement, usually formal, between two or more persons to do or not do something specified.*" If I think of the word covenant in modern usage, two contexts come to mind. Firstly, in legal terms, you sometimes hear phrases like, '*there was a covenant on the land*' - some sort of legally binding agreement in relation to a piece of property.

The second context when we still hear the word covenant used of a formal agreement, is in marriage. One of my favourite parts of the wedding service is the prayer offered for the couple's wedding ring or rings. A ring, of course, has no beginning and end, and this is picked up, symbolically, in the words of the prayer:

"Heavenly Father, by your blessing, let these rings be to the couple a symbol of unending love and faithfulness; to remind them of the vow and covenant which they have made this day...."

So we do still come across the word covenant today, in a few contexts, but it's not common. However, in the Bible, covenant is an incredibly important concept; a great overarching theme. The relationship between God and people is described as a *covenant* relationship.

In the Bible, there are a number of really significant occasions in the history of humanity's relationship with God where this covenant relationship is renewed; where there's a fresh start. As Lent began, the first pitstop on our whistle-stop tour of the history of God's covenant relationship with humanity, saw us come to a halt with Noah, as God made his covenant with all of creation, promising never to flood the earth again, and giving the rainbow as a sign of that promise. Fast forward to the next Sunday of Lent, and we dropped in on God renewing his covenant relationship through Abraham; and then on again, to the giving of the 10 Commandments, as God reiterated his special relationship with his people through Moses.

Our tour has seen us cover centuries, from the life of Noah, through Abraham, to Moses. Now today we jump forward again to the time of Jeremiah, one of the great prophets of the Old Testament. But before we pause and look at *this* moment in the story of God's covenant relationship with humanity, and what it might have to say to us in Lent 2021, let's take a few moments to remind ourselves what this special, covenant, relationship is all about.

Covenants were common in the ancient world, and certainly not unique to Israel. They regulated all sorts of interactions and had a clear legal framework. Evidence still exists of legal covenants of the time, and they have a specific format, the elements of which are seen in the covenant agreements of the Bible. For people at that time, this form of agreement was familiar. In fact, it's interesting to explore just how closely these ancient Biblical covenants mirror the format and structure of legal covenants of the time - but that's for another day!

A really important thing to grasp about this overarching theme of covenant in the Bible is that the covenant is initiated and renewed by God; revealing God's love for humanity; and making clear that no matter what we do, God doesn't give up on us, or abandon us. This is the heart of God's covenant relationship with humanity, and this hasn't changed: it didn't change through the centuries from Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, to Jeremiah; it didn't change moving forward from Jeremiah up to the time of Jesus; and it hasn't changed since the time of the New Testament. In fact this is still true today: God loves humanity and no matter what we do, God doesn't give up on us or abandon us. This is the basis of our faith and our hope.

So, let's look at this short passage of just 4 verses, from chapter 31 of Jeremiah, first reminding ourselves how Jeremiah fits into the story. The Book of Jeremiah is one of the longest in the Bible, and it tells the story of the final days of the kingdom of Judah. It begins in 626BC when the young Jeremiah heard the call of God to be his prophet, and continues, through 587BC when Judah was conquered by Babylon and the people taken into exile; and then concludes with the majority of the people in exile, and some left behind who, against Jeremiah's exhortation, end up turning to Egypt.

So, the book traces Jeremiah's life and ministry and the fate of the kingdom of Judah. You may remember that centuries before, the land and people were divided into the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah. By the time of Jeremiah, the Kingdom of Israel no longer existed, having been destroyed about 100 years earlier, in 722BC, by the Assyrians.

This history lesson is relevant because within today's verses from Jeremiah 31, God speaks about his new covenant with both Judah *and* Israel, despite the fact that Israel hadn't existed for over 100 years! This provides an important hint about this *new* covenant.

These verses are part of three chapters, near the middle of Jeremiah, which are sometimes called, "*The Book of Consolation*" - a section where God unfolds the amazing promises of salvation for those who endure the exile. The chapter we heard from, chapter 31, contains wonderful visions of the people resettling the land; when the punishment is over; of a future when God will make a new covenant with both the people of Israel *and* the people of Judah. So these verses give a glimpse into the future - to a *new* covenant.

In what ways is this covenant new? In the past, there had been a pattern: people had broken the covenant, and then God renewed it; but this time it's *new*. One of the major differences is that rather than the terms of the covenant being inscribed on stone tablets, like the 10 commandments, *this* time, the agreement will be written on hearts, and established in minds.

If something is written on your heart, it's written into your very being; it's something you've put your heart to - that you're committed to; it's not just *consciously* agreeing to keep a law, rather your heart is involved. This covenant written on your heart is something you desire to follow and defines your very being, not merely your actions. Your heart is changed; you desire, and will, to keep your commitment to the covenant.

Another aspect of this new covenant is that those who are party to it will be a people, a community, who all know God intimately. They will enjoy this close relationship with God, and, being faithful, God will forgive them and put their wrongs behind them.

Jeremiah is given a beautiful vision of this new covenant relationship with God; of a transformed community, whose hearts are changed. What an amazing picture of hope for people living in exile!

And of course, beyond *Jeremiah's* prophetic life and message for the exiles of Judah in the 6th century BC; as we read this passage today, as Christians, we see further fulfilment of the vision of a new covenant through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Through Jesus, all peoples, of all times, including us, are offered forgiveness and a new relationship with God inscribed on our hearts.

God said to the people in Jeremiah's day, and God continues to say today, *This is the covenant I will make with the people... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.*"

As we head towards our commemorations of Holy Week; of the atrocities of Good Friday; and, eventually, to the celebrations of Easter Day, may we pause to consider our response to God's covenant love - to this overarching theme found throughout the long history of the Bible, and beyond - a covenant initiated and renewed by God; revealing God's steadfast and long-suffering love for humanity; and which makes clear that no matter what we do, God doesn't give up on us, or abandon us: the basis of our faith and hope.

It reminds me of God's name, revealed first to Moses and repeated time and again through the centuries of the Bible. Moses asked God's name, and the answer he received is rather a description of God's unchanging character. In Exodus 34 we read, *"Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with [Moses] and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."* This is God: utterly committed to us in a covenant relationship based on compassion, grace, love and faithfulness. Amen.