

## COVENANT COMMUNITY

→ Every year the Oxford Dictionary adds new words to its collection, simply because their usage has grown and they have become a recognised and accepted part of our language. During this last year words and phrases like silly money, selfie, jeggings, deets, phablet and adorbs have all been added to the collection. Now for some of you, those will be instantly recognisable words, but for others I can see that a glazed expression has appeared on your face and it may feel as if I am speaking a foreign language! But the reality is that our language evolves. New words come into popular usage and others drop out!

.....This morning as we arrive at this service, we are perhaps confronted with one of those words that has slipped out of our language; out of common usage, so that as we share in this act of worship this morning we may even need to ask what is a covenant; what does it mean for us in the context of this special service today and what should it mean in terms of our daily living?

→ Let's think for a moment about how we used to use this word "covenant" and why it has slipped from our conversation. Some of you may recall that in the days before Gift Aid was introduced back in 2000, you had to take out a covenant with a charity if you wanted them to benefit from tax refunds on your giving. At one stage the covenant lasted seven years, then the commitment was reduced to four years and now, in order for the charity to benefit from the gifts that we make, we don't need to be committed to the charity at all!

.....Another area in which we have talked about covenant is in the marriage service and whilst I don't generally believe that people necessarily go into marriage casually, it does feel as if we've lost the notion of covenant within that relationship. Some see marriage as a legal contract and so we see a growth in pre-nuptial agreements; others are influenced by our very individualistic society and our personal rights, forget the notion of forgiveness and walk away. James Emery White who is a current Christian pastor and writer says this, "If relationships become too uncomfortable, we disengage. We change jobs, move out of a community, find a new church or leave our marriage. We minimise relational life as portable and disposable. But to Christians, relational life is not portable and disposable. People are made in the image of God – even the ones we dislike. And they are just as loved by the God who brings forgiveness through the pain of the cross."

→ So, a covenant is a solemn and mutually binding commitment, made within an understanding of love that is all about commitment to the other party rather than about our own self-fulfilment. So, today, in this Covenant Service we celebrate God's amazing and unconditional commitment of love to us which has existed since the beginning of time. He has promised unfailing love to us. He has kept his promise and continues to keep that promise. And we enter into that covenant of love when we make our own solemn promises in response. Just as the covenant that we heard about in Deuteronomy was in response to God's deliverance of the Israelite people from Egypt so ours today is a response to the free gifts of grace and salvation that God offers to us in Jesus Christ.

.....So perhaps a good place for us to start is to focus our thoughts on what God's gift to us in Christ is all about. Let's recall the humbling gift of a baby in a manger that we have celebrated so recently. Let's recognise the obedience displayed in the life of Christ as he grew up and lived here among us. Let's focus our minds on the things he taught and did. Let's acknowledge his suffering, his death and his resurrection. Let's be thankful for the gift of the Holy Spirit and then may our hearts be stirred enough to say "Wow! This God really does deserve my commitment and I want to renew that today.

→ But even then, perhaps there is a second question to ask about covenant in this passage from Deuteronomy. Why does God make a covenant at all? When we say the covenant prayer it is full of "I" and "me." "I am no longer my own but yours... put me to what you will ... rank me with whom you will ... put me to suffering ... and so on. And when we're using language like that it's very tempting for us to think that the covenant is between me and God – no one else's business! And in some senses it is and it's really important that we all make our own personal commitment of faith and obedience to God in Christ.

..... But, God has bigger ideas and bigger purposes. This isn't just about me and my relationship with God, or you and your relationship with God. The "why" of the covenant is all about God bringing together his people. In that passage from Deuteronomy, God has all the people of Israel gathered in front of him: leaders, elders, men, women and children, plus the strangers in the camp and the covenant is made together as Moses explains, "so that the Lord may now confirm you as his people and be your God, as he promised you and your ancestors."

.....God's intention is that we should be a community; a group of people committed to him and to each other. The church was never meant to simply be an accidental gathering of whoever chose to turn up in the same place at the same time on a Sunday, but a group of people who are intentional about their relationship with God and their relationships with each other. God created us to live in community and to be the light of the world together. He calls us to prove that it's possible to live in this way to a world where break-ups, unforgiveness and prejudice are a feature of many people's lives.

.....So it's no wonder that God wanted every member of the Israelite community before him for the covenant – this was a really serious project that he was initiating. And this morning, we make this covenant together – that's partly why I always find it so sad that some members of our community choose not to share in this special act today. We renew our covenant together as the people of God for the sake of this community in which we live, work and serve. And what does that actually mean for us in our daily living? How might that change the way we behave and the decisions we make?

.....Think for a moment about those times when you perhaps choose not to come to worship on a Sunday morning but to have an extra hour in bed instead or do something else with your Sunday? Do you ever think about how that makes other members of this church family feel? Or when you don't turn up at your Home Group because you've had a better offer? Or when you pull out of fulfilling a particular role or you simply say "no" to an opportunity to serve that presents itself? Think honestly

for a moment. Is your response simply about what you want or does the impact of your decision on the rest of this family, this community of which you are a part here in this place feature at all? If it doesn't, then I'd like to suggest that what we do here together as we renew our covenant, means that perhaps it should.

.....The actual words of the covenant prayer can't leave us in much doubt about that, can they? We're not promising to only do those things that we like, or that fulfil us, or that we've got time for, or that are better than whatever else is on offer at the time, or that are easy. No! We're going to promise that we are willing to be and do things that are tough and that will be sometimes be overlooked by others and that don't fit in with our natural inclinations and will cause us real hardship. But let's get this clear. It's not about saying that we're willing to be ill, or made redundant or struggle in the relationship with our family members. This is all about the kingdom of God. We are saying that we will do whatever it takes to see God's kingdom come amongst us. It may be tough, but we make that commitment out of our humble trust in a God who absolutely wants the best for us.

.....So within this community of faith we are called to be a people together, who support, and encourage, and pray for and love one another, warts and all. And that probably requires of us what Paul describes as a transformed mind. Many of us, me included, are inclined to pick and choose. We obey when it's convenient or not too expensive or doesn't conflict with our leisure and what we want to do. We think we can give God our Sunday mornings sometimes but the rest of the time is our own. We think we can give a bit of money to the church and use the rest just as we please. But, we need to see things differently. We need to allow God by his Spirit to change us and shape us as he moulds us into a covenant community, committed to him and committed to each other, displaying to the world a different and better way of living. Jesus gave his life for us and those of us who wholeheartedly respond to that love discover a different world ourselves.

→ So, the covenant is a solemn and mutual commitment that God initiates and to which he invites us to respond. We've said that God does all of this in order to shape us into a people for himself who will be a witness not just as individuals but as a community to a broken world. But perhaps just one final question – when do we make this covenant? You might think that's a really stupid question. We make it today don't we? We renew our commitment here, now, in this service. And this passage from Deuteronomy is literally riddled with references to "today." One commentator who reflected on this passage wrote, "the emphasis in this passage is upon the present, not in the sense that a new covenant is being initiated, but rather in the sense that the renewing of the covenant will revitalise the relationship."

.....Today is a word that speaks of urgency and frequency and regularity. But it is also about revitalising our relationship with God. I know I could do with that? How about you? These words that we will speak in just a short while are not just some dry words that some of us are apprehensive about uttering, but they are a real opportunity for us to say to God, "come and breathe new life into our relationship with you!"

.....What happens now when sometimes the life of faith feels dull and uninspiring? Do you just plod on and hope things will work out or change of their

own accord? Do you pull out of the things that you're involved in because you somehow think that you must have made wrong choices for things to feel like this? Or do you walk away from your church family altogether, even if only for a while, in search of something else that's going to make life feel less dull?

.....Of course it may be true to say that seeking fresh ways of serving or new ways of connecting with God may well help us through those times of spiritual dryness and hardship and of course the Holy Spirit may just change things for you if you allow him to. But sometimes the refreshment and revitalisation that we seek comes through basic everyday decisions to continue being obedient and to remain committed to the community of which you are a part. Canon Michael Green who is a fairly well known Anglican clergy person and writer once said that he knew far too many Christians who were refusing to get on with the Christian life until God did something extraordinary in their lives. He said they should just simply make the decision to be obedient in the ordinary everyday!

→ So, today may be the "when" for you and me to simply say "yes" again to Jesus. Yes to walking in his ways. Yes to pleasing him. Paul says in his letter to the Romans that when our minds are transformed then we know God's will and what is good and pleasing to him. And the natural thing to do when you know what pleases someone is to do it! So, today, as we say "yes" to God and do so from our hearts, it may just be that it will so delight God that there is a new spark in our relationship with him and in our relationships with each other.

.....As we respond to God's committed love of us, displayed in the person of Jesus Christ, with our own promises, brought to life in committed actions of love for him and for one another, who knows what might be around the corner for us all. We might just see God renewing his purposes in us individually. We might just see God renewing his purposes in us as a covenant community. We might just see God renewing his purposes for the world right here in this community of Cheadle Hulme. What an exciting prospect? What an exciting year lies ahead of us as we say "yes" to God and reveal that in our commitment to him and our love and consideration for one another. May the Holy Spirit so work in us that the word covenant becomes part of our everyday language and we truly "walk the talk" so that both God's purposes and our hopes might be fulfilled.