

Sermon

The New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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Last Sunday, we looked at Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus which included that famous verse, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."¹ I spoke of Jesus taking our sin into himself and dying with it to pay the penalty for sin and rebellion against God. Today's gospel reading which is set in the last few days before his death covers similar ground.

Jeremiah

So I would like to focus mainly on the Old Testament passage. Jeremiah was a prophet in the last years of the kingdom of Judah before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586BC. It appears that he was there under siege when he received this prophecy. It is a message from God about covenants.

A broken covenant

What is a covenant? We might think of marriage covenants or legal covenants - strong, formal promises usually witnessed by others to help ensure they are kept. The COD defines a Biblical covenant as a compact between God and humanity. A compact is a binding agreement with the idea of being firmly brought together – we use it in that way when we talk about compacting earth. A Biblical covenant firmly binds together God with people.

The first covenant referred to in the reading today was the agreement made at Mt Sinai between God and the Hebrews. There were laws and expectations. But, the people of Israel had repeatedly failed to keep their side of the agreement.

As a consequence, judgement had fallen on Israel and would before long they would be taken away from the promised land into exile. In this bleak situation, Jeremiah announced that God will put in place a new covenant. It is to be in the time of the Messiah ("The time is coming" is his code for that time). God himself will make this new covenant and it would be of a different nature from the first. The old covenant did not empower the people to keep it. It was based on merit and good works. It did not give life – in fact Paul was to write later, that the Law kills, the Spirit gives life.

A new covenant

Instead this new covenant would involve a change of heart. Rather than try to control behaviour, it would change motivation. The law would be written on the hearts of the people rather than on tablets of stone. It would give a close knowledge of God and relationship with him. There would be forgiveness of sins and peace of heart.

Hear it again:

"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. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

- I will put my law in their minds, I will write it on their hearts;
- I will be their God;

¹ John 3:16

- I will forgive their wickedness.

“I will, I will, I will,” God is taking the active part in fulfilling the human side of that agreement. He will cause them to be able to keep that covenant. Let’s look at those three areas.

A love of his will

“I will put my law in their minds and I will write it in their hearts.²” That makes the law internal instead of external, something that springs up from within instead of being imposed from without. It seems that our consciences are activated and tuned to God’s wavelength. Now it is easy to feel condemned for failing to live as we know we should – whether we fail from time to time or repeatedly. But there is a huge difference between on the one hand: sinning, turning from it and asking forgiveness and on the other hand: being indifferent to the matter and not caring about those actions.

Please don’t get me wrong. I am not saying that all Christians are readily obedient at all times and sin is no longer an issue. But I am talking about a sea-change within. There are still reasons why people are not able to live up to their aspirations. Some of those reasons can be helped. Helen and I have a course called *Live the Life*, which tackles some of hindrances. There may be wrong beliefs which hinder us, we may need to learn how to apply Jesus’ work to our own lives, we may need freedom from enemy oppression. So if that interests you, look out for that course later this year.

Relationship

The first area is a love of his will, the second is a relationship. “I will be their God and they will be my people.³” This is the relationship which God has desired through all the events of *The Bible*. *The Bible* is not an account of people seeking God. Rather it is a record of God seeking people who will respond positively to him. He says that we, who are Christians, will all know the Lord. This the Hebrew word, *yada*, is not intellectual knowing but experience of a person. To know God is to have an intimate, experiential knowledge of him. The night I was saved, I immediately knew God whereas before I had known about him. Suddenly, I was aware of him and what my relationship was to him. I knew I was an adopted son; I was loved; I had access to the Father.

Forgiveness of Sins

The new covenant gives a love of his will, a relationship with him and thirdly, it gives forgiveness of sins. When we were in London we got to know a Welsh electrician, Keith Davies, who had been a roadie for rock groups. He came along to an Alpha course at the church we attended. This was what he wrote about this experience:

I didn’t know what to expect, but the people were very friendly, the food was good, and the talks and discussions were lively too. I continued to go, and decided to give the weekend away a try as well despite being a bit sceptical. The speaker was a Welshman so I took to him straight away. The talks were about the Holy Spirit and I took the opportunity to be prayed for. I felt a great sense of release. That night I couldn’t sleep, instead I spent most of the night reading the Bible. The next morning, as we were worshipping, I actually saw a vision of Jesus on the cross. The grief was over-bearing and I began to cry. I was overwhelmed really because I realised for the first time that Jesus had given his life for me. I had turned my back on Jesus and I felt guilty for that. But he was welcoming me.

I was prayed for my whole body filled up with the Holy Spirit and something just changed inside me. I had suffered with a painful back for years and that got healed too! I walked around for the next few days whispering ‘Jesus I love you’, but in my head I was shouting it!

... previously, there was a part of my life that was empty and void but that isn’t the case now. I’m not so lonely anymore either. I’ve always had friends around me, but no-one to talk to. Now I can talk to God whenever and wherever. I don’t talk to him out of ritual, but because it’s a relationship.

Did you hear his delight in finding forgiveness and coming into relationship with God?

There are the three things God says he will do in this new covenant: give us a love for his will, give us a relationship with him and forgive our sins.

In ancient times covenants were more common than now. For example, warriors would make a covenant together to protect each other in battle and so if one fell, the other would care for his dependents. They would make a cut in their wrists or hands and mingle their blood. The Bible always uses the term ‘cutting covenant’ because blood always flowed when a covenant was made – often from a sacrificial animal sometimes of the participants. The warriors would offer each other bread and wine saying, “This is my body; this is my blood.” It symbolised the depth of their mutual commitment.

² Jeremiah 31:33

³ Jeremiah 31:33

When Jesus met with his disciples for the Last Supper, he announced the new covenant “the new covenant in my blood”⁴ and like the warriors of old, gave bread and wine to represent his body and wine. His blood was shed in the making of this covenant as he hung the next day on the cross, flogged and pierced.

We reenact this covenant every time we take communion. Communion is a covenant meal. Each time we restate that Jesus has given himself to us; we have given ourselves to him. He is utterly committed to us; we are utterly committed to him.

Baptism is the sign of entering that covenant – it represents washing from sin. It also portrays dying to the old way of living and being raised to new life.

Of course, this comes with a cost. “Ah,” you say, “I knew there was a snag.” No there isn’t. The cost is immense but it is not paid by you.

The cost he paid

How then is the cost paid? We say it each week, “This is my blood of the New Covenant which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” The covenant was made in blood and paid in blood.

- He died for our sins so we might be forgiven.
- He died showing the glory of God even in that squalor and pain.
- There we see God reconciling the world to himself in Christ.
- There the creator suffers with his creation.
- There the judge dies to free the guilty.
- There justice was perfectly expressed; punishing the sin of the world and at the same time mercy is perfectly expressed allowing the guilty to go free legally.
- There is displayed the love of God for the world that he gives his only son, that whoever believes in him, should not perish but have eternal life.

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⁴ Luke 22:19-20