

## Storylines: THE COVENANT THREAD

*St Matthias Church 19 November 2017 John Beckett*

A pig and a chicken were walking by a church where a gala charity event was taking place. Getting caught up in the spirit, the pig suggested to the chicken that they each make a contribution. "Great idea!" the chicken cried. "Let's offer them ham and eggs?" "Not so fast," said the pig. "For you, that's a contribution. For me, it's a total commitment."

We don't do commitment well these days do we?

Whether that's commitment to a diet or the gym, committing to an event several months ahead – we'd rather keep our options open...

And yet commitment is a really important. And it is especially important for us to demonstrate commitment in any relationship we are in for that relationship to work and to flourish.

So, for example, marriage: Husband and wife commit to love each other through thick and thin in a lifelong partnership.

God's desire is that we have committed relationships with him so that "he will be our God and we will be his people".

The imagery of that relationship being like that of husband and wife is a common and beautiful theme throughout Scripture to describe the intimacy and love and commitment God longs for us to know with him, but more often, the concept that is most commonly used to describe this relationship in the Bible is via a contract or "covenant" which is also the same word as "Testament".

There are 5 times in the Bible where God arranges a covenant with his people.

- The first is with Noah and his family that he'll never again send such a flood and the rainbow is the sign of that covenant.
- Next we have God's covenant deal with Abraham— this is more of a conventional contract, with duties on both side:

God promises that he will have descendants as many as the stars in the sky; that he will be given Canaan, the promised land; and that all nations upon earth will be blessed through him and his descendants.

Abraham's side of the deal is for his family to live as a distinctive people, belonging to God, marked by the rite of circumcision, and walking in obedience to God's ways.

What is fascinating, but frankly weird is the way in which Covenants at that time were sealed - an animal or animals would be sacrificed— maybe the death signifying the importance of the deal; then those carcasses were cut in half - presumably to signify the two sides of the contact. In Genesis 15 something like that happened, with an added mysterious divine touch: *"Abram (as he was then) slaughtered a heifer, goat and a ram and cut them in halves opposite each other... later, when the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram..."*

Let's move on with the story:

The next covenant is that made at the foot of Mount Sinai.

God's people have been set free from slavery in Egypt. They recognise their debt to God and enter into a fresh agreement with him.

In the 10 Commandments God declares that he will be their God, and that if they want him to be their God and continue to love and care for them, then the deal is that they live according to God's ways of justice and mercy and love.

In a nutshell, again, the covenant relationship is described: He will be our God and we will be his people.

[It's closely tied up with the kingdom thread we heard about last week. There is an agreement that God will be their King and the people agree to live in distinctive ways to show others what their king is like.]

Then, as with other ancient societies of the time, there follow a set of blessings when the covenant agreement is kept, and, a set of curses or penalties for when that covenant is broken.

If his people keep the covenant, God promises to bless his people with prosperity, children, freedom from their enemies, that they will be a holy people...

but there are dire warnings if his people break their side of the bargain by worshiping other gods or idols and do not live as He requires.

At first reading, the warnings sound harsh to us, but the concept of contracts with conditions and penalty clauses is not unknown!

In the Storylines book, the authors Andy Croft and Mike Pilavachi put it this way

Andy, at 21 is still young enough to dream of signing a contract with Chelsea football club.

The benefits of this contract will be a disgustingly huge salary and his photo regularly on the back page of the newspapers. The obligations would be: he would have to train every day, eat lots of vegetables, be nice to the fans (even early in the morning when he's usually moody) and be loyal to the club. The penalty clauses of the contract would be: if he didn't train hard enough and lost form, or if he misbehaved and regularly got red cards, he would be sold to Scunthorpe United (something Mike would consider to be perfect justice).

You get the idea...anyway, it's at this point in history, that our OT reading from Exodus comes in – the people have heard the deal and agree to it. And, just as with Abraham, they cut the deal by sacrificing animals; and instead of dividing the carcasses, they divide up the blood –

*Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. <sup>7</sup> Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, 'We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.'*

*<sup>8</sup> Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, 'This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.'*

Now think back to what you might know of the history of God's people... **Did they manage to obey everything that the Lord had told them to do?**

Sometimes yes; sometimes no.

There were glimmers of hope in some kings and especially in the generally godly King David. Indeed God renews his covenant with his people – through King David in 2 Samuel chapter 7. He promises to continue to be their God; to love them, and to have one of King David’s descendants on the throne – think ahead to....? Jesus of course...

But on the whole, Gods people continued to disobey him and worship other gods.

That really hurt God. Hosea the prophet tells how God’s people who he’d taken by the hand as in marriage, and loved intensely, had effectively been playing the harlot...

And, in the end, harsh it might seem to us, appalled at their adultery, the penalty clauses for breaking the covenant kicked in. They were invaded and taken into exile in the foreign country of Babylon.

But God had not given up on the people he loved so much.

Something remarkable happened while they were in exile, God spoke again through the prophet Jeremiah:

Here he promised something very different: - though it would be something even more costly. Let’s read together:

#### **Jeremiah 31:31-34**

<sup>31</sup> ‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD,  
 ‘when I will make a new covenant  
 with the people of Israel  
 and with the people of Judah.

<sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant  
 I made with their ancestors

when I took them by the hand  
 to lead them out of Egypt,  
 because they broke my covenant,  
 though I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD.

<sup>33</sup> ‘This is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel  
 after that time,’ declares the LORD.

‘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.

<sup>34</sup> No longer will they teach their neighbour,  
 or say to one another, “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.’

And so from the Old Covenant, or testament, we are led into the New.

- At one level it wasn’t that different - in the new covenant, God did not water down the requirements.
- Nor did he abolish the penalty clauses.
- Just as with the old covenants, a sacrifice was needed to cut the covenant, but this time God cut the covenant and demonstrated his commitment to us **by providing the sacrifice himself**– in Jesus – the son of Abraham, in David’s line, the one true Israelite who alone kept all of God’s commandments...

And do you remember Jesus’ words, at the last supper, as he passed the cup around?

‘Drink from it, all of you.’<sup>28</sup> This is my **blood of the covenant**, (or the new covenant) which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus uses exactly the same phrase ‘blood of the covenant’ that Moses used when the covenant was made with God’s people all the way back in Exodus.

Jesus also links this with the New covenant promised through Jeremiah by relating to the phrase in verse 34 of that prophecy about it being for the forgiveness of sins.

Through Jesus, God has brokered a new covenant – incorporating the blessings of the first ones, but superseding them with something so much better for us.

He promises forgiveness; the renewing gift of the Holy Spirit, eternal life beginning now by entering into that loving intimate relationship with God that Jeremiah spoke of too,

because they will all know me,

from the least of them to the greatest

and also, just as Jeremiah also prophesied, God’s laws are written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit, to enable us to want to live in obedience to God’s ways.

And what of those penalty clauses that are still part of the covenant?

In a remarkable passage in chapter 3 of Galatians, Paul declares this: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hangs on a tree’.*

**We have been rescued from the penalty clause when Jesus died on the cross!** What amazing news for us!

So, the terms of the New Covenant look like this:

God promises to be our God and forgive us and set us free for a new eternal relationship with Him

For our part, he invites us to commit to Him:

- Yes, Lord, be our God and be our King
- We believe and trust in you Lord Jesus and in what you have done on the cross for us.

And in gratitude for all He has done, what will you offer him? Will you be like the chicken earlier, just a make a contribution?

- Maybe that is all you have been doing up til now – will you not make that covenant real today?
- Do we not owe him our very selves?

Join with me in saying to Him: Today, Lord, we do not just offer you a contribution, we commit our very selves to you, in willing service to be the people you want us to be.

Do you recall the way the covenant at Sinai was cut with the sacrifice and blood sprinkled over the people? In a similar way, today, as we share in the body of Christ, the sacrificial lamb of God, and as we share in Christ’s blood of the new covenant, so we renew that covenant relationship with our loving and faithful God.

Lord, you are our God, and we are your people.