

Hexham Trinity Methodist Church Covenant Sunday 2020 - 10:30am

Reading: John 21:15-19

Prayer

So here we are again! Another Zoom first, we've done Easter Sunday on Zoom, we've done Advent Sunday on Zoom, we've done the Carol Service and Christmas Day on Zoom and here we are with Covenant Sunday on Zoom! I wonder how many more Zoom first's they'll be in the next few months.

I'm very conscious that we come as a community to Covenant Sunday this year, in fact most years, with different feelings and emotions. For some this will be deeply special moment each year, for others it will be one of those odd Methodist things we do, for others it will be somewhere in between. In amongst all the oddness of Covenant Sunday on Zoom it is very odd to be celebrating Covenant without Holy Communion, a Covenant service where we will meet with God in word, in promise, in prayer but not in bread and wine. Again for some this will be deeply significant and for others it will be less so.

As we come to renew our commitment to God, to make our convenient with God afresh we hold each others different feelings and emotions together as the people of God, as God's community, as God's family. I hope that for each of us today in some way this covenant service helps us to connect with God and to renew out commitment to God.

Covenant Sunday is often a time when the preacher thinks about the future, about what the year ahead will bring, about how we can walk with God to where God is calling us. As I prepared for Covenant Sunday this year I wasn't led to think about the future but to the year that has been. In my praying and thinking I was led to think back to Covenant Sunday a year ago, a time when we renewed our Covenant with God and promised to walk with God into 2020, to be available to God, to give ourselves wholeheartedly to God. I preached from John 15 and the command to love one another, I gave examples about not feeling on our own in a crowd but supporting each other through practical tasks like babysitting or dropping by someones house for a cup of coffee.

How little did we know when we made those promises a year ago about the year ahead, how little did we know that the very things I encouraged us to do would be the things that we would be forbidden from doing in a global pandemic. Looking back I realised just how important renewing our Covenant with God is, how much it really is about committing to God whatever comes, whatever we face, wherever God calls us. When we look back we are reminded that in renewing our Covenant with God we freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to God and in doing so we place our trust in God for whatever is to come.

As I looked back I was particularly struck by the line in the Covenant Prayer *'put me to doing, put me to suffering'* a line which often causes great consternation as we ask well would God really put us to suffering. I find the modern translation of the Covenant Prayer a real help in understanding what is meant in the original. The modern translation says, from the line before, *'Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me, in all that I do, and in all that I may endure'*. *'Put me to suffering'* is not about God putting us to suffering or God sending a global pandemic but acknowledging in whatever we face or endure we want to be people who do God's will not ours.

In 2020 we have truly been put to suffering, we have truly suffered through COVID whether we have contracted the virus ourselves, whether we have learnt to work differently, whether our mental health has suffered, whether we have missed our family, whether we have been lonely. We have all been *'put to suffering'* and had to ensure much. Looking back to praying the Covenant prayer last year I am reminded that I committed in suffering to walk with God and be a follower of Jesus. I committed to be a Christian, to be a disciple, whatever might come, even suffering, even though I had no idea that 2020 would be a year of such pain and difficulty. A year on I can testify that despite all the world has thrown at me, God is good, God has been very good.

That doesn't mean it has been easy of course and there are many times I have cried out to God, yelled at God, screamed at God when will this be over, why haven't you made it better, what are you doing God.

It was in being reminded that I'd renewed my covenant with God, that I'd prayed *'put me to suffering'* that I was led to the reading I choose for today from John 21. To the passage where Jesus asks Peter three times *'do you love me'*. Through 2020 it feels at times like God has had to ask me more than once do you love me, it feels like in 2020 I've asked God more than once do you really know what you are doing here.

The passage from John 21 is one of the resurrection appearances, one of the passages that records Jesus' appearance to the disciples after he has risen from the dead. The passage comes straight after Jesus has had breakfast with the disciples on the shore of the sea of Tiberius. In the passage Jesus asks Peter three times *'do you love me?'*, each time he answers *'You know that I love you'* and each time Jesus responds *'feed my sheep'*. Peter's three declarations of love for Jesus mirror his three denials of Jesus before the cock crowed.

The third time that Jesus asks Peter *'do you love me'* Jesus uses a different greek word for love. There are five greek words which translate to our one English word for love. The first two times Jesus asks Peter he uses the word *'agape'*, a word which reflect God's love for us, an unconditional love. The third time he uses the word *'philia'* which means a much closer love, the love of a deep

friendship, the love of real friendship and commitment, not a romantic love that would be the word 'eros' but a deep deep love, something very special and close. Some commentators argue that this different use of the words is simply about diversity in the vocabulary in the account but others feel it's more significant and I would agree. I feel when Jesus asks the third time with the word 'philia' he's really pushing Peter, not just do you love me, but do you really love me, are you really committed to me. When Peter answers, with his frustration at being asked again, 'yes Lord you know that I love you' Jesus knew, we know, that Peter was really committed to Jesus that whatever Peter would endure he was committed to Jesus.

This sense of being asked three times to shows the real commitment that Peter had to Jesus reminded me of that deep commitment of faith that we have as a church community. How through this last year, through all that we have endured, God hasn't just been there but we have really been with God, we have chosen God again and again because we love Jesus, because a year ago we renewed our Covenant with God to walk with him no matter what.

The reading reminded me of the significance of the commitment we made to God last year, of the covenant we made. It showed me how God kept God's side of the covenant and also how we have kept ours despite all that we have endured.

As I sat with the scriptures though God showed me that in the passage was not just an affirmation of how our covenant had lived out through the last year but of what making our covenant afresh today means as we move forward into 2021. I was reminded of three things.

Firstly, that each time Peter answers Jesus' question, Jesus gives him a task '*feed my sheep*'. One of the things that this passage does is to establish Peter's role amongst the disciples in the same way the passage in Matthew 16 does when Jesus says '*Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'), and upon this rock I will build my church*'. If we are not careful therefore we can see the instruction to Peter as been very top down and hierarchical, the task given to those who are called to teach and to preach. But like the word love the greek doesn't use the same word for feed three times, on one occasion rather than '*feed my sheep*' the phrase '*tend my sheep*' is used. I believe the call to feed Jesus' sheep, to tend Jesus' sheep is a call to all those who love Jesus. I believe it is an instruction that as we love God so we must love the other, tend the other, feed the other. That we must love one another. As we renew our covenant with God today, as we recommit to Jesus today so we also recommit to loving, feeding, tending the other and in our world at the moment there are many who society see as other, that God calls us to love, to feed, to tend as the body of Christ.

Secondly, this passage reminds us that walking with God leads us to the unknown, and as I've already said this morning 2020 has shown us that beyond measure. After Peter has said the third

time that he loves Jesus in verse 18 and 19 Jesus tells Peter that his future is unknown and out of his control. Jesus contrasts Peter's younger years when he could fasten his belt and go where he wished to his older years when someone else will fasten the belt and take him where he doesn't want to go. The future is unknown to us yet it is not unknown to God, the brackets in verse 19 tell us why Jesus says these words and show us that Jesus knew what the future held for Peter.

I wish our future was more known, but being back in tier 4, being back on Zoom shows us how unknown our future is. What I am certain of is that God knows what the future holds and God knows what and who the church needs to be for that future. The future will be different to the past, it won't be like it is now, thank God, but it also won't be like it was before COVID. As we renew our commitment to God, as we make a covenant with God afresh we do so knowing that just like last year we don't know the future but God does and God will be with us.

Thirdly, this passage finishes with the invitation or maybe instruction '*follow me*'. Despite Peter's denials, despite being asked three times, despite the unknown future Jesus says to Peter '*follow me*'. Jesus knows that the best thing for Peter, the very thing he calls Peter to, the best thing for anyone is to follow Jesus, that even though the task to feed, tend, love others seems to big to handle, that even though the future is unknown the best way to live, the only way to live is to follow Jesus. For when we follow Jesus we will be led by the Spirit along the path which God lays before us, along the path which leads to life and not to death, the path that leads to love, joy, peace, patience and kindness, the path that leads to healing and to wholeness, the path that leads to eternal life.

This passage reminds us that the covenant we made a year ago was real and that in the dreadful year of 2020 it has been honoured by God and by us. As we come to commit to God again today, as we make our covenant again with God this passage shows us that for each who loves God there is a task to do, to tend, love, feed the other, that responding to that task will take us into the unknown but despite that the best way to live is following Jesus.

So this morning I offer you the same invitation as Jesus offered, to follow him, to commit yourselves again to God and to make your covenant with God afresh for this new year.

I cannot tell you what 2021 will bring, I cannot tell you how God will call you or what the future will be like. But I can tell you that the God who we committed to a year ago, who honoured the covenant to us will do the same again, will honour God's side of the covenant and help us to do the same. I can promise that God will be with us in Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit. I can promise that God will be good, because God is good, all the time.

Will you follow Jesus? Amen.