

Reflection for Lent V 2015; Sunday March 22
UWI Chapel Anglican Community Morning Eucharist Service
Theme: "God Gives a New Covenant in Christ"

Prayer:

“God is before us
God is behind us
God’s love around us,
On our right and our left.

God there above us
God there beneath us
God’s might around us,
On our right and our left.

God all about us
God deep within us
God’s peace be with us,
Today and forever.”

(From “On Eagles’ Wings: The Life and Spirit of St. Chad” by David Adam)

Old Testament Reading: Jeremiah 31: 31-34

31 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. **32** It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord.

33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: **I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.**

34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

The theme for today: **“God Gives a New Covenant in Christ”**.

Definition of Covenant, Oxford English Dictionary:

1. *Law* A formal agreement, contract, or promise in writing, especially one undertaking to make regular payments to a charity.
2. *Theology* An agreement which brings about a relationship of commitment between God and his people.
The Jewish faith is based on the biblical covenants made with Abraham, Moses, and David.

What can we understand by “covenant” as presented in the Word?

Biblical scholars agree that there are different Hebrew words for our English translation.

Herman Ridderbos, (1909 – 2007), Dutch theologian and biblical scholar, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 130-31.

Ref: Biblical Commentaries Online, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/covenant.html>

*“In the Septuagint διαθηκη is regularly used as the translation of the covenant of God (berith), rather than the apparently more available word συνθηκη. **In this there is already an expression of the fact that the covenant of God does not have the character of a contract between two parties, but rather that of a one-sided grant.** This corresponds with the covenant-idea in the Old Testament, in which berith, even in human relations, sometimes refers to a one-party guarantee which a more favored person gives a less favored one (cf. Josh. 9:6, 15; 1 Sam. 11:1; Ezek. 17:13). And it is most peculiarly true of the divine covenantal deed that it is a one-party guarantee. **It comes not from man at all, but from God alone. This does not rule out the fact, of course, that it involves religious and ethical obligation, namely that of faith and obedience** (Gen. 17:9-10), and that thus the reciprocal element is taken up in the covenant...*

*...Meanwhile, of course, the fact remains that in all the different dispensations of the covenant of grace, God's unconditional promise to Abraham constitutes its heart and kernel. **Consequently, when the “new covenant” (Jer. 31:33) is announced, one thing is expressly made clear: namely, that the disposition which is indispensable for the human reception of the covenant-benefits will itself be***

granted as the gift of God Himself. In other words, that very thing which in the Sinaitic covenant was so plainly set down as a condition, belongs in the new covenant to the benefits promised by God in the covenant itself. The New Testament concept of διαθηκη lies quite in the line of that development, particularly as Paul thinks of it, as is evident in [Galatians 3 and 4], and in such a place as Rom. 9. That New Testament concept points to a salvation whose benefits are guaranteed by God and as a matter of fact are actually given, because in Christ and through Him the conditions of the covenant are fulfilled.”

God gives a new covenant **in Jesus Christ**. As we approach Holy Week, the Word encourages us to truly focus on Jesus. Last week, we reflected on our Lord as the very sustenance of our lives – the Bread of Life. Today, we reflect on Him as the mediator of the New Covenant as given to us by God. Many of us here accept this as fact and we have for perhaps most of our lives, but I share with you the challenge that came to me as I reflected on the theme and the Word for today. It is a challenge to examine our relationship with Jesus Christ with fresh eyes - **Who is Jesus to me?**

God, who seeks to “put His law within us and...write on our hearts”, requires of us I believe, not a theoretical answer but a holistic response from mind, heart and soul.

As we ponder the question, I offer a few reflections:

- Author of many award-winning Christian books, Philip Yancey, in his book “The Jesus I Never Knew”, paints a picture of a passionate, driven character he discovered as part of a class that explored films about Jesus. From the introductory chapter, “The Jesus I Thought I knew”:

“Jesus, I found, bore little resemblance to the Mister Rogers figure I had read in Sunday school and was remarkably unlike the person I had studied in Bible College... The more I studied Jesus, the more difficult it became to pigeon-hole him...”

Who is Jesus to me?

- **New Testament Reading: Hebrews 5: 1-10 (NRSV)**

1 Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

2 He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since **he himself is subject to weakness**; **3** and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. **4** And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. **5** So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; **6** as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

7 *In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.*

8 *Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;*
9 *and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,*

10 having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Who is Jesus to me? Do we truly appreciate the depths of humanity that He engaged, the level of His suffering on our behalf as He became the source of eternal salvation?

- **The Gospel: John 12: 20 – 33 (NRSV)**

20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "**Sir, we wish to see Jesus.**"

22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

23 **Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."**

Puzzling answer? I believe Jesus answers the unasked question of those seeking Him, us included – who is this man really?

Later in John's Gospel, verse 34: *The crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?"*

- **Jesus Christ, Son of Man**

Biblical scholars agree that this was the Lord's preferred title for himself, and that the term expresses a duality in His role - it points to His humanity and servanthood, but also reflects Daniel's vision of the son of man as a coming figure of judgment and authority:

Daniel 7: 13-14 (NRSV)

¹³As I watched in the night visions,

I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven.

And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.

¹⁴To him was given dominion and glory and kingship,

that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away,

and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed."

In the remaining verses of the Gospel today, Jesus outlines this dual role of servant of the people and God's Son quite clearly:

24 Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

27 "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." **30** Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.

31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

From those times to now, probably precisely because we have not been able to "pigeon-hole" Him as a more straight-forward kind of King, able and willing to lead a prosperity-based religion, many have not been able to accept Him.

Daily Office Lectionary Reading for yesterday, Saturday of Lent IV, John 6: 60 – 71:

58 This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever."

59 He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

61 But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? **62** Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

63 It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. **64** But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. **65** And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father." **66** Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

67 So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" **68** Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.

Who is Jesus to me, to us? Where do we take our stand?

During the course of my own pondering of these questions, I had the opportunity to speak with a wise spiritual director. I shared the depth of feelings of unworthiness - I certainly do not always approach the throne of grace with confidence. I was reminded that while my unworthiness, our unworthiness my friends, is a statement of fact – the other side of the truth, of the covenant, belongs to God, and His grace is always greater.

Jesus is Lord, who comes alongside and lifts our heads from downcast postures, if we'll let Him. Jesus calls us to table to eat the bread and drink the wine - to receive sustenance, and then enables us, to go from that place to tell others where to find Bread.

God ever seeks to be writing in our lives, sisters and brothers – writing on our hearts in all our seasons - new songs of grace, mercy, forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation and liberation. God writes these songs with us in and through our relationship with His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is calling again this Lenten season and as especially as we approach Holy Week, to come home to Him, to allow Him to help us deal with our doubts and challenges, and to go deeper with Him.

And where are we going with our Lord? A road paved with palm branches, an upper room with a meal of bread and wine waiting as well as a basin and a towel, a garden, a cross lifted high, an empty tomb – **we are going home to Love.**

Suzanne Shirley-Newnham, March 2015