**Week 1 – Covenant: God’s Invitation**

**Bible Reading: Jeremiah 31:31-34**

**TEACH - Content to help inform a sermon or small group outline**

**Introduction**

* The future remains uncertain but we determine to go forward together.
* One thing is certain – God has this, and he has us. He is right in the midst of us – he is Emmanuel – God with us. We have been celebrating that fact throughout Christmas.
* As we enter this new year, we must remind ourselves that God has chosen to invite us into covenant with himself.
* Covenant is not a word or term that we use that frequently, and so we have been in been in danger of losing the significance and the power that flows from our covenantal relationship with God.
* The Bible is all about covenant. That’s what ‘testament’ means – the old covenant and the new covenant. Covenant itself is not explained in the Bible, yet it is there all the time. It is the backdrop to everything, like the scenery on the stage of a theatre.

**Exploration**

**1. What is a covenant?**

* A contract or agreement between two parties. They may be individuals, families, states, kings, or even God.
* The parties might be on the same level (eg two families, two kings) with mutual obligations agreed upon freely or on different levels (God and human beings; a large empire and a smaller nation) with the stronger party imposing the conditions on the weaker party (obedience, taxes, tribute) in exchange for certain benefits (eg protection).
* There may be promise of specific benefits, rewards, or blessings for people who keep the terms of the covenant; but also the threat of sanctions, punishments or curses for people who break the terms.
* Between the contracting parties, symbols or signs might be exchanged to remind the two parties about the agreement.

**2. A hypothetical example of a covenant**[[1]](#footnote-1)

* Tribe A of 500 people is approached by a tribe of 1,000 people with a view to make a pact – the covenant. They agree that:
  + they would stand as one against external attacks
  + the resources of one tribe would be available to the other
  + instead of two tribes they will become one – they would share everything they had **in covenant** with each other – one may have been goat herders led by Chief Windsor and the other maybe richer cattle herders, warriors whose leader was called Mountbatten – but now in covenant they are a tribe of 1,500 herding both goats and cows.
* To seal this covenant, they would take a heifer, ram and perhaps a goat and butcher them – cutting them in half and laying the halves of the bodies in a line.
* The two leaders, starting from opposite ends, would walk through the blood, swapping places with each other.
* Once they had swapped, their names might be put together (one became Windsor Mountbatten and the other became known as Mountbatten Windsor) so that everyone would know that they belonged to each other.
* A picture like this is found in Genesis 15, with Abram entering a covenant with God.Although this clearly is not two equal parties, it follows this pattern – symbolic changing of places, sealed with blood, joining together of name.
* Abram becomes Abraham and the sign of covenant was sealed with a cutting – every male was to undergo circumcision ‘for this will be the sign of covenant among you’.

**3. Implications**

* Abraham enters into the covenant with God, and as descendants of Abraham we are inheritors of the covenant.
* It is a covenant which says that we belong to him and he to us. ‘I will walk with you and you shall walk with me; all you have I shall have and all I have shall be yours. As you walk in obedience, I will be with you and your children and your children’s children.’
* Throughout the Bible we read of God renewing the covenant (see [Jeremiah 31:31](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/JER.31.31.niv); [Ezekiel 36:26](https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/EZK.36.26.NIV)). Ultimately, the covenant is fulfilled in the person of Jesus.
* In understanding covenant, we will appreciate Jesus even more. The great covenant events of the Bible all head towards the coming of Christ.

* It is why the narrative of the birth and life of Christ are contained in a new book, the New Testament = the New Covenant! It is why Jesus is described as the mediator of the new covenant ([Hebrews 9:11-15](https://www.bible.com/bible/111/HEB.9.11-15.NIV)). It’s why at the Last Supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you’. (Luke 22:20).
* Paul wrote and explained that we are all invited into covenant with Christ ([Ephesians 2:11-13](https://www.bible.com/bible/111/eph.2.11-13.NIV)), and now we are invited to go forward together with him as a covenanted people.
* In these days, at the start of 2021, consciously, intentionally, we are invited to renew our covenant or to enter into covenant for the first time with him by saying: ‘All I have is yours’ and discover that God says to us ‘All I have is yours.’

**Conclusion**

* Covenant is amongst the best news we ever have received! In a covenant with God – in this coming together, in this exchange of places –we give up our life to him and he gives his life to us.
* He says to us, ‘You give me your life that should end in death marked and tarnished with sin, and you will receive my eternal life!’
* The blood of Christ was shed for us as the payment for our sins. He dies in our place and this is the culmination of the eternal covenant that has been running through all the pages of Scripture.
* You won’t just have his name – ‘***Christ***ian’ – you will have him! The covenant will be written on your hearts, not engraved on stone. This covenant will be sealed with the blood of Christ. It is written in red.
* Now when we understand covenant, it changes everything for us. It helps us understand and appreciate that:
  + God is Emmanuel – the one who is with us.
  + He is able to help us at every turn of our lives and every step of the way.
  + Heaven is not simply a destination, it is an eternal experience to be increasingly enjoyed now.
  + Our relationship with a loving, covenant-making God must impact our relationships with fellow believers who are also part of the covenant – we are family!
  + Together our lives must be in the service of Father God; but this means too in the service of his created world for which we have a covenanted responsibility. It is God’s world in which we have been called to be salt, light and love, in order that boys and girls and men and women of every nation and tribe should have the opportunity to hear and know the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**REFLECT – questions for discussion/small groups**

**Personal**

* What have been the significant changes you have experienced during the past year? Reflect on the positive and negative aspects.
* Have you experienced God in any new and different ways in recent days?
* How will you respond to God’s invitation to renew or enter into covenant with him?

**Community**

* Share ideas (in a small group) for prayer resources / Bible study plans that help you to deepen your relationship with God.
* How might a fresh understanding of covenant impact your relationships with other people?

**Response**

Read [Jeremiah 31:31-34](https://my.bible.com/en-GB/bible/111/JER.31.31-34.niv) aloud, then:

* Light a candle to remember Christ’s presence with you.
* Sit for 5 to 15 minutes in silent meditation paying attention to the deep breath.
* God’s law is ‘written on your heart’.
* Search your heart. What is written on your heart?
* What word written on your heart captures your attention today?
* Focus on this word.
* What feelings are heightened as you focus on this word?
* What do you know about God as you stay with the focus?
* What message does God have for you?
* Is there a call to action?
* Give thanks to God for this time in prayer and for any new insights you have received.

(<http://prayingthelectionary.life/2018/03/12/jeremiah-3131-34-written-on-their-hearts>)

1. Inspired by Rev Mike Breen, one-time Rector of St Thomas, Sheffield [↑](#footnote-ref-1)