

Dear Friends

This Sunday is our Covenant service. This letter takes the form of the message that can be read if you are following the printed order of worship so it's a little more 'in depth' than a pastoral letter would usually be. There are some important words of thanks to our outgoing secretary and assistant secretary at the end.

You could be forgiven for wondering what a covenant is? Covenant is an ancient word that describes an agreement in which promises are made and in which gifts may be given and received that act as a guarantee or what has been promised. This may have a legal dimension, but covenants are usually about a relationship which calls for mutual trust and respect. In Scripture they are characterised by love. In our society Marriage is a covenant people enter in which promises are made and rings are given and received as two people enter a new kind of relationship and it's this kind of covenant that God calls people to enter with him.

God entered a covenant with Abraham in which God called Abraham to walk before the Lord and live without blame and God promised that Abraham would be the father of a great nation and the sign of this covenant was circumcision. Genesis 17. Many years later when the heirs of this promise, the Hebrew people were fleeing slavery in Egypt God renewed this promise. There is a real sense that these people belong to an exceptional nation, a holy people, belonging to God himself and governed by the laws Moses received beginning with the ten commandments which were written on tablets of stone. Exodus 19,20, 24. History isn't as neat as many of us would like to believe and as the people of God struggled to live in this covenant, God raised up prophets to recall them to what it was all about and one of them was Jeremiah. Jeremiah promised there would be a new covenant in which everyone would know God, from the greatest and the least and instead of the tablets of stone God's law would be written on their hearts with the promise that God himself would be there God and they would be his people. Jeremiah 31 vs 31-34.

The words of Jeremiah are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Here at this table where Jesus spoke of this wine and said it's the blood of the new covenant we are invited to enter into the promises of God. In Jesus Christ God invites us to a new covenant that is more personal, a covenant that isn't governed by the law but forged by grace, an invitation born of love, not conditional on good behaviour but simply gifted to us, written in our hearts.

Covenant is costly, sealed in the blood of Jesus, sacrificial death shoulders our guilt, embraces our shame and dies that we may live again and that is why we renew this covenant at this table, remembering the cost of this love as we celebrate the grace he offers us. We enter this covenant by embracing his grace and Jesus offers signs of this covenant relationship, guarantees of what he has promised, baptism and communion. Much more could be said about baptism but when we are baptised, we are baptised as members of one body for the covenant is never just an individual thing but about people. Never just me and Jesus always you me and Jesus.

About four hundred years ago the early Baptist were seeking a new way of being biblical churches and they found what they were seeking in the biblical idea of covenant. These covenants usually contained a phrase like this, 'walking together and watching over one another'. As they formed new churches, they believed God was calling them to walk together and watch over one another because they knew that being a Christian was about more than believing the right things, it was about relationship, a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ and with one another as brothers and sisters.

Another way of expressing this sense that Christ is found wherever people gather in his name can be found in a contemporary song. 'The church is wherever God's people are praising, giving their thanks for his goodness today, the church is wherever disciples of Jesus remember his story and walk in his way.'

Some Baptist churches gave these covenants expression through writing them down but not all, but all were agreed that the Christian church is forged wherever men and women, adults and children come together confessing that Jesus is Lord. This means

our emphasis falls on relationship with God than subscribing to a statement of Faith. We are more concerned that people are 'In Christ' living in a real relationship with God through him than we are to being correct about every single thing.

One other feature of these covenants that is worth noting and that's the way they face the future with confident faith, its not about conserving the church at a moment in time, it's about who we are becoming together as members of his body, the body of Christ, facing the future with courage and confidence in the promises of God.

In our covenant service you are invited to renew our covenant one with another, walking together in the way of Jesus Christ, watching over one-another in love and facing the future with courage as we share in the Kingdom of God.

As we do this we shall also be thanking Gordon and Stewart for their steadfast kindness and good will in serving New North Road as secretary and assistant secretary, much of their work hidden from view because it was quiet, but essential to well-being, harmony and growth of the church especially during the pastoral vacancy. Thank you to them both very much. We also recognise the generous service of Bernice Dema and Faye Deer who are retiring as deacons and welcome Dave who in addition to his great service as our acting treasurer is returning to the diaconate and Christy Morakingo who is beginning her first term as a new deacon at New North road.

Our deacons have shouldered great responsibility through this pandemic. In the future we hope our deacons will be adopting portfolios that will give them a light touch oversight of different spheres of the churches life and we will be telling you more about this in future. I particularly want to thank Sheila Selbie who is taking on administrative responsibilities for our building use as part of our new administrative group and we will also be telling you more about this in the future. I am looking forward to the day when we can convene ordinary church meetings where you can all share your wisdom, insight, hopes and vision.

Your friend and pastor

Mark

